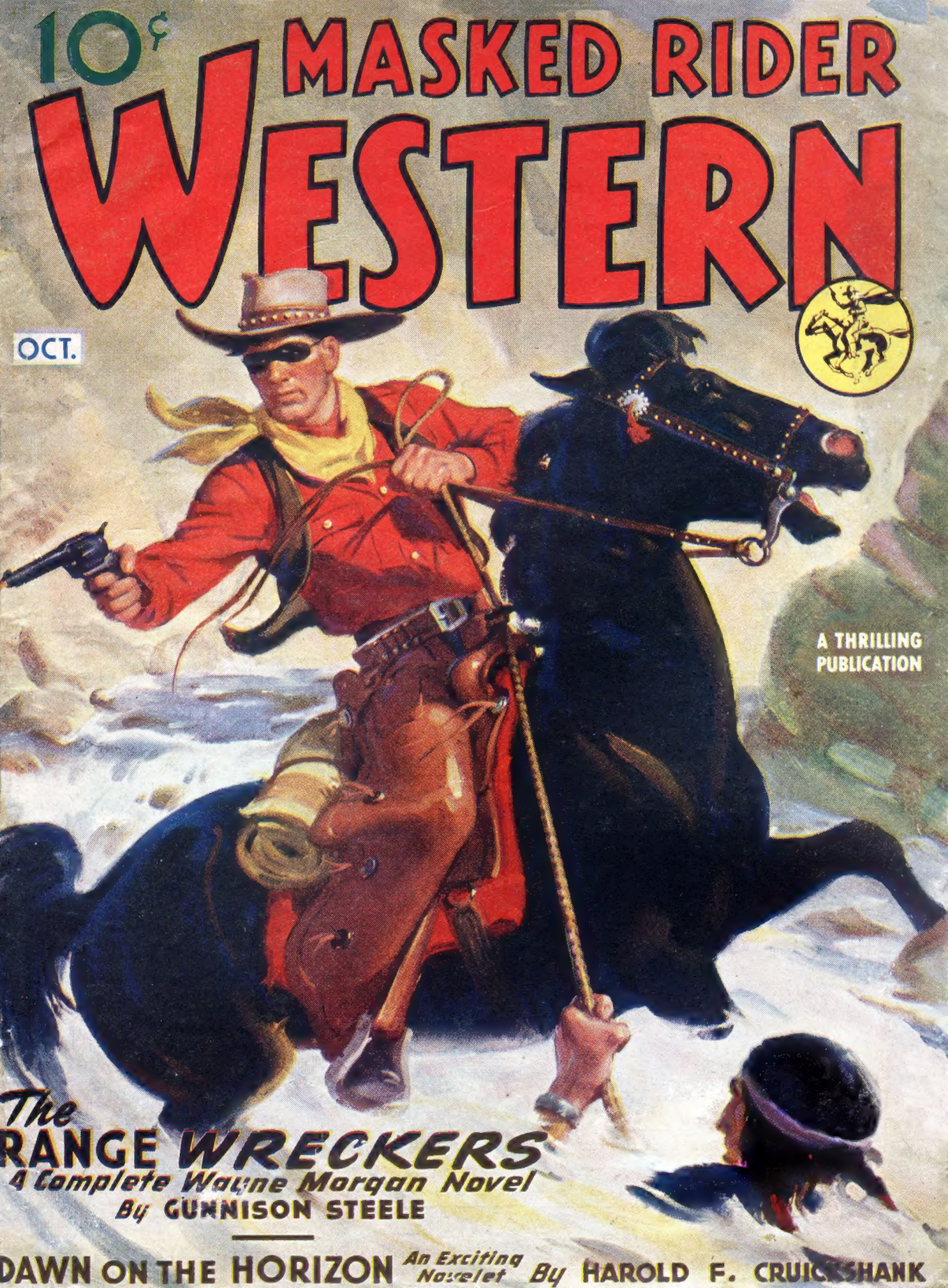
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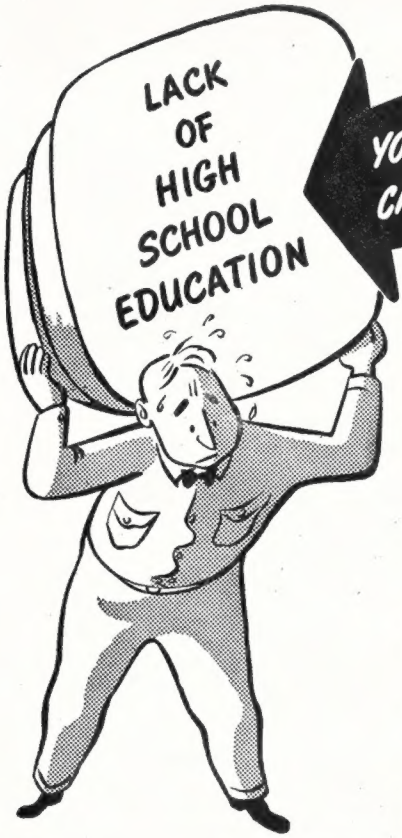

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by Gunnison Steele

When a vicious outlaw leader schemes to rob the holdings of Sapphire Valley ranchers, a masked avenger of injustice—and his Yaqui pard—come a-ridin' to save the victims of lawless greed and establish range justice! A roaring action epic of the West! 9

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When a deadly feud rages in the Mesa country, courageous Ace Barfield of the Diamond B uses all his gun savvy in order to settle the roaring fracas!

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A department for readers conducted by America's most famous rodeo expert.

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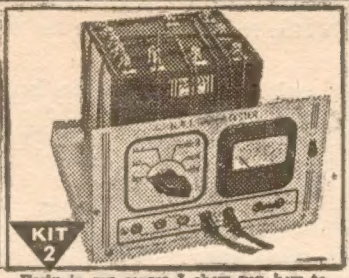

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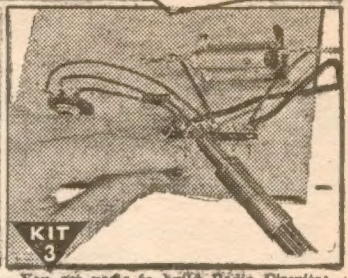

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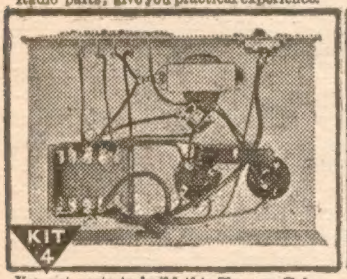

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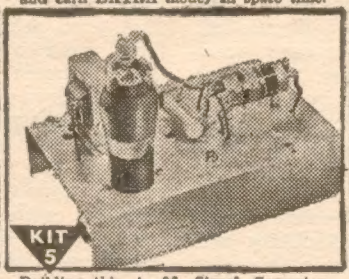

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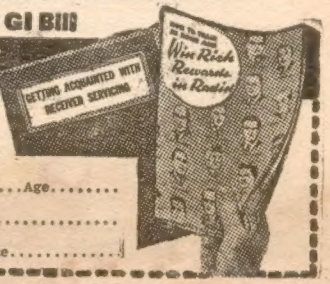

A Department for Readers Conducted by

FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI, WADDIES, grab your twine and snag yourself a bronc from the corral! Throw your kak on him and we will be off to another jaunt across the wide open spaces and indulge in some more Trail Talk.

We will follow along many of the trails of long ago, trails that held romance, adventure and danger. Some of those trails are practically obliterated by the march of time and the wheels of progress. They are dim in the memory of some of the few old-timers left who traversed them in the early days when there was danger all along those trails, but those old trails are still bright in the pages of our history of the West. There are many thrilling stories of adventure along those trails that will be told time and again for years to come!

The Oldtime Trail Drivers Association, now that the war is over, in all probability will hold their annual convention again this year in San Antonio, Texas, although there are not many left to meet in the convention. Most of those grand old men who made history along the historic cattle trails, the Chisholm Trail, the Loving-Goodnight Trail, and others, have long since gone on the long, long trail into eternity.

There are so few of the old-time trail drivers left that it is doubtful that they would have broken the wartime convention rules had they met during the war.

The Real Trail-Driving Days

Hardly did the real trail-driving days last more than thirty years. They really lasted not quite that long. They began in the early Seventies and the railroads were built to such an extent that it was no longer profitable to make the long drives with cattle by about the middle of the Nineties. So you can see that anybody who went up the trail in those days would be pretty well on in years by now.

However, there are still a few living who went up the trail when it was wildest, when cattle were being driven up the trail in an almost endless chain of thousands upon thousands of head, and there was always danger and adventure along with each herd.

A good price for a cowboy with the trail herd was two dollars per day, if he furnished his own horse. Two dollars per day—and for this a fellow was supposed to fight with six-guns if necessary, to ford or swim sometimes swollen streams, to risk his life in an effort to repel any attack by Indians. He was expected to do the same in case a band of outlaws or cattle rustlers swooped down upon the herd and the trail drivers. He had to face the dangers of a stampede and scores of other dangers, and yet the trail drivers never struck for higher wages, and there are few records if any where a trail driver ever showed the white feather, ever refused to face the danger necessary to protect the cattle and the property of the man who was paying him the two dollars per day.

They Thrived on Danger

One reason why they always faced the dangers of the trail unflinchingly is because they loved adventure—and danger was the spice of the trail driver's life. The stampede was just one of the many things they had to contend with. A herd of cattle might stampede at the slightest provocation, the slightest noise or even the sight of a small object.

(Continued on page 89)

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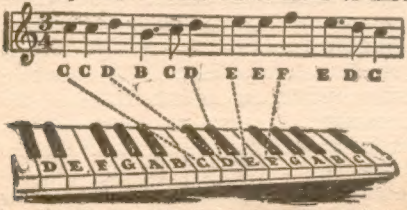
My Country 'Tis of Thee Sweet Land of Liberty

Look at the diagram. The first note on the music is "C". Follow the dotted line to the keyboard and locate "C" on the piano. Find the other notes the same way. Now strike the notes as indicated and you'll be playing the melody of the famous patriotic hymn "America." Easy as A-B-C, isn't it!

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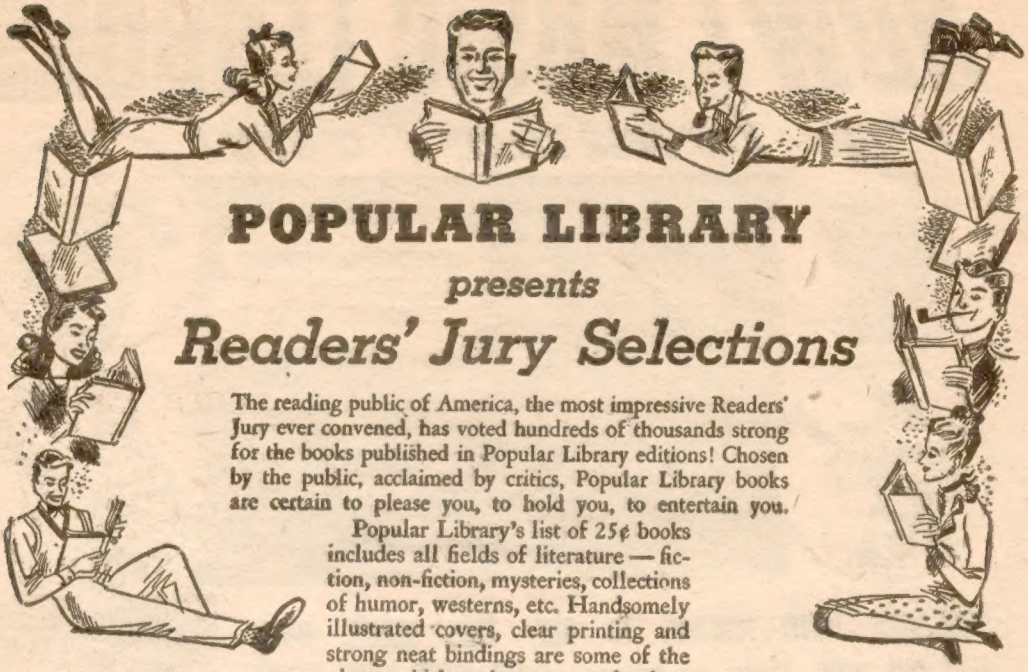

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TROUBLE SHOOTER.....*by Ernest Haycox*
BUCKY FOLLOWS A COLD TRAIL.....*by William MacLeod Raine*

Buzzards circled low to peer greedily at the seemingly bodiless head on the sand (CHAPTER I)

THE RANGE WRECKERS

By GUNNISON STEELE

When a vicious outlaw leader schemes to rob the holdings of the ranchers of Sapphire Valley, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk come a-ridin' to side the victims of lawless greed!

CHAPTER I

Torture Trail

THE sun beat down fiercely on the unprotected head there on the sand. Several buzzards circled low in the brassy sky, craning their scrawny necks to peer downward with greedy, vulturine eyes. The wind made a low, melancholy sound.

The seemingly bodiless head and face were those of a man past middle-age. Ants and other insects crawled through the gray hair. On the seamed, bearded face was an expression of pain and weariness and utter hopelessness. The eyes were closed.

A COMPLETE MASKED RIDER NOVEL

The Masked Rider Faces Desperate Perils

Three saddled horses, tied to mesquite bushes nearby, stamped restlessly. Three gun-belted, hard-eyed men squatted on the sand a few yards from the head, and watched. One of them, slightly younger than the others, shuddered a little.

"I thought I was a hard hombre," he muttered. "But I never done anything like this before, and I never saw anything like it. Why didn't we just pump him full of lead and let him lay?"

"Because," growled one of the others, a dark, burly man, "the boss told us to do it this way. I don't get it, no more than you do. Reckon he just likes to make things suffer."

"And him not even here to see it! Kind of like a cougar, he is. A mountain cat looks harmless enough, till he sinks his claws in yuh. Yuh wouldn't ever think a man like him could be the big skookum wolf he is."

"We ain't supposed to think!" growled the burly man. "We're just supposed to do what we're told—and that's what I aim to do, long as I get paid!"

A low moan came from the head there on the hot sand. The eyes had opened, and sweat was running over the bearded face. The head moved from side to side—and then it was evident that the head belonged to a man whose entire body had been buried in an upright position in the sand, with only his head protruding!

Obviously, the mens' voices had roused the oldster. He stared dully at his tormenters, his eyes holding no fear, only a deep misery and puzzlement. He tried to speak, failed, wet his parched lips with his tongue and tried again.

"Why're yuh doin' this?" he mumbled then.

The three shifted uneasily, refusing to meet those tortured eyes. The rustle of the buzzards' wings above was plainly audible.

"Because we're gettin' paid for it," the dark man finally rumbled.

"Who's payin' yuh?"

"That's our business!"

THE oldster closed his eyes again, but opened them almost immediately. He rocked his head from side to side, as if the slight movement afforded him a particle of comfort.

"Whip Shann, I reckon!" he muttered. "Far as I know, he's the only enemy I got in the world. He hates me, because I swore him into the pen for stealin' my cows. He swore he'd get me. But if he wanted me dead, why didn't he just put a bullet in my back?"

"I didn't say it was Whip Shann that paid us!" his burly tormentor snapped. "You know I don't ride for Shann."

"No. I know yuh, Jeb Kurth. I know yuh've got a little outfit over on Barter Creek. I knowed yuh was a worthless thief, but I never figgered yuh'd stoop to a thing like this!"

"A man's got to live," Kurth muttered. "'Get old Blackjack Malone,' the boss told us. 'Treat the old puma rough as yuh please, but don't kill him quick!' Then he told us to do—this. He told us to stay with yuh till yuh died, which we're doin'. We never figgered it'd take so long, though. And I never said it was Shann that paid us to do it. That's yore own idea!"

"I can't think of anybody else that'd want me dead," old Blackjack Malone whispered. "Nor anybody else that'd be Injun enough to do this."

"I hear yore own boy, Nick Malone, don't cotton to yuh any too well," the burly Kurth suggested slyly. "Kicked him out several years ago, didn't yuh?"

Malone was silent a moment. Then his head moved slowly, negatively.

"Me and the button had a fallin' out," he whispered huskily. "Mebbe it was my fault. He was wild, full of ginger—but not bad. Kurth, yuh're a filthy, slimy snake for insinuatin' my boy'd do this to me!"

"Somebody's comin'!" suddenly warned the youngest killer—a slender, red-hairded fellow—and leaped to his feet. "Over that ridge there!"

Kurth and the other killer also leaped to their feet, whirling toward a low sand ridge a hundred yards away. Two riders had topped the ridge, were outlined sharply against the brassy sky.

One of the riders was mounted on a rangy, powerful roan, the other was on a wiry pinto. Even at that distance, the three torturers could see that the man on the roan was tall, powerful, and in more ordinary range garb. Twin black Colts were in the holster of the gun-belt which encircled his lean waist.

as He Battles to Expose a Grim Killer!

The other rider was an Indian, lithe, graceful, his long black hair held in place by a scarlet bandeau about his head.

Obviously, the riders had not seen the three killers there at the foot of the ridge. However, crossing the ridge, they headed directly toward them.

Kurth cursed furiously.

"Let 'em have it!" he snarled. "We're sunk if we get caught at this business!"

scarlet sash which encircled his waist. In a saddle scabbard, however, was a repeating rifle, and within three seconds after the first shot crashed the rifle was in the Yaqui's hands and a cartridge was levered into the barrel.

The sudden appearance of Morgan and Blue Hawk had so startled Kurth and his two henchmen that their first shots were wild. Now Kurth bawled:

WAYNE MORGAN

He jerked out his gun, blasted a shot at the two riders. The shot was followed closely by others from the guns of his henchmen. Hot lead screamed through the air.

Wayne Morgan, the tall wandering waddy on the roan, ducked instinctively as the first bullet snarled past his ear. He flung himself side-ward in the saddle, at the same time snatching the black six-shooters from their holsters with lightning speed. He yelled a strident warning to his Yaqui partner, Blue Hawk.

Blue Hawk wore no belt gun, carrying instead a keen-bladed knife sheathed at the

"Don't let them two jaspers get away! They've seen too much. Cut 'em down!"

It quickly became evident, though, that the two were not trying to get away. Instead of wheeling their mounts and trying to flee out of range of the hammering guns, Morgan and Blue Hawk, guns in hand, spurred straight toward the torturers of old "Blackjack" Malone. The deep-throated snarl of Morgan's six-shooters rolled over the desert, followed quickly by the louder *whang-g!* of Blue Hawk's rifle.

Kurth cursed wildly, staggered, and went to one knee. But he struggled upright and

ran, limping badly, toward the horses that were tethered nearby.

"I wasn't paid to get killed!" he yelled harshly. "Let's get out of here!"

FIRING over their shoulders at the charging horsemen, all three of the killers dived for their mounts, started jerking frantically at the reins. Morgan and Blue Hawk drove straight at the three, guns blazing. They were not shooting to kill, for they had no idea why they had been fired on. But it was not their natures to run when attacked without provocation, when the odds were anywhere near even. It now was merely their intention to give the three warlike men they had stumbled upon a taste of their own medicine.

The three had their reins loose, had leaped into saddles. They spurred away from the spot, still firing wildly back over their shoulders. Kurth was swearing steadily and viciously at the pain in his wounded leg.

An exclamation burst suddenly from Wayne Morgan's lips. He was staring down at the ground, amazement and unbelief in his blue eyes—staring at the head there on the sand. He guessed instantly what had happened, for he could see that the eyes were open, that the man was alive.

Rage boiled up inside him. He jerked the roan to a halt, leaped to the ground. He knew the agonies that the buried man must be suffering, and he didn't want that agony prolonged a second longer than was necessary.

However, driven by the anger inside him, he took time for one final shot at the fleeing killers—and now he was shooting to kill. He steadied one of the black guns, and the weapon blazed and roared.

Jeb Kurth stiffened in his saddle, then plummeted head-first to the ground, rolling over and over before slamming into a boulder and becoming a twisted, motionless heap. Before Morgan could fire again, the other two killers had ridden over a low ridge and vanished. At least one of those two, Morgan knew, had been wounded by a bullet from the Yaqui's rifle.

Blue Hawk, sensing that only something highly unusual could have accounted for Morgan's actions, wheeled the pinto and rode back to where he could see Morgan on his knees. Morgan was scooping frantically at the loose sand with his hands.

"Shall I pursue them?" the Yaqui called, in the almost faultless English he had learned at Mission school.

"Let 'em go, Hawk," Wayne Morgan said, through clenched teeth. "For the present, at least. We've got more important work to do here!"

Wasting no time in useless talk, Blue Hawk leaped agilely to the ground and started helping Morgan scoop the hot sand away from the oldster's body. Blackjack Malone watched them, deep thanksgiving and gratitude for his unexpected deliverance in his eyes.

"You hombres shore got here just in time," he panted weakly. "I don't think I could of held out much longer."

"How long yuh been here, like this, old-timer?" Morgan asked.

"Since late yesterday," the old man sighed.

Morgan pursed his lips in a low whistle. It was now late afternoon of another day. He could well imagine the torment this oldster must have undergone during the last twenty-four hours. Without water, unable to move anything except his head, half the time in the mericless heat of a blazing sun, with ants and other insects making fiery trails over his exposed flesh.

The tall cowboy's righteous anger was increasing with each second. His eyes, usually mild, now were like slivers of blue ice. His wide, usually good-humored mouth was a hard, straight line.

Blue Hawk's coppery face was, as always, impassive. But it would have been a safe bet that the Yaqui's emotions and thoughts kept pace with those of his white companion.

Morgan's mind was seething with questions he wanted to ask the old-timer, but he forced himself to wait. He knew that only devils in human form could have doomed a man to such a death as obviously had been meant for this oldster. And something must be done about it.

For here before his eyes was stark evidence that crime and injustice were rampant on this seemingly peaceful Sapphire Range!

"Pard," Morgan turned his head to speak to Blue Hawk as he worked to free the oldster, "keep an eye peeled for those hombres who escaped. There's more devilment in this game than we at first suspected."

"I'll say there is!" the old man gasped. "They'll put a bullet in me from the rocks out yonder if they get a chance."

"Save your strength," Morgan advised. "I want your whole story."

Unerringly the rope settled over the fleeing outlaw's shoulders, and he was jerked from saddle (CHAPTER XIII)

CHAPTER II

The Hermit

WITHIN two minutes Morgan and Blue Hawk had scooped away enough of the sand so that they could lift the old rancher from the hole where he had been buried. He was a small, wiry man. His clothes were in tatters, and in a dozen places his thin body was lacerated by wounds that looked like knife slashes. It was obvious that, before being buried, he had been brutally treated.

He was so weak from his ordeal, his limbs so cramped from inaction, that he was unable to stand. Held upright by his rescuers, he gradually restored circulation to his body. Blue Hawk had already given him water from his canteen.

"What's yore name, old-timer?" Morgan asked.

"Blackjack Malone. I own the Broken Bell outfit, over west a few miles.

"I reckon yuh know the skunks that done this?" Morgan said grimly.

"Nope, I don't," the old man told him.

Morgan looked at him sharply.

"Yuh shore of that?"

"Oh, I know them three that was here a few minutes ago, all right. One was Jeb Kurth, who owned a two-bit outfit to the north. I say 'owned', because that's Kurth layin' over yonder. I reckon he's dead—and good riddance. The others was a couple of drifters I'd seen hangin' about Silver Bow, named Red Ivor and Sid Parrot. Them three waylaid me on the trail yesterday when I was on my way home from town. They treated me purty rough. They beat me up, and kind of used me as a whittlin' stick for their bowies. When they got tired of that kind of fun, they buried me in the sand—like you found me just now. They aimed to let me stay there till I died. Then, I reckon, they'd of just covered up my head too."

"But you said you didn't know 'em."

"I know the polecats that done it—but I don't know who paid 'em to do it!"

"Then yuh think somebody else was behind it?" prodded the cowboy.

"I know it! I'd have knowed it, even if they hadn't told me so." There was bitterness in the rancher's voice. "Likely it's the same one that's had my cattle killed, my water poisoned, my hay burned and my fences cut!"

"Yuh had many cattle stole?"

"Not stole—killed, I said! Killed and left for the buzzards. Somebody's out to ruin me, and they've danged near done it. My outfit's mortgaged to the hilt right now, when it ought to be makin' me several thousand a year. Looks like they ain't satisfied with just ruinin' me, though. They want my hide. I'd shore enough been a goner, too, if you two gents hadn't happened along when yuh did."

For the first time, Blackjack Malone looked curiously at his rescuers.

"You two ride for some outfit here in the basin?" he asked.

Morgan told him their names, shook his head.

"Yuh might say we're just passin' through," he remarked.

"Lucky for me yuh was. Yuh lookin' for a job?"

Morgan didn't answer at once. Already his keen, analytical mind was looking ahead. Events of the last few moments had convinced him that there was work for him and Blue Hawk here on this range. Following events would have to point out the procedure to be followed.

Plainly, however, old Blackjack Malone was at the heart of the mystery. If somebody wanted him killed, which was obvious, other attempts would be made on his life. It was therefore quite as obvious that the best method of coming to grips with the rancher's enemies was to remain in close proximity to Malone.

"I might take yuh up on that job," Morgan said. "My friend here has got some other business to attend to, but I'm free."

He caught hold of the oldster's shoulder, as Malone staggered and almost fell.

"Reckon yuh're worse done in than yuh realized," Morgan said gently. "Yuh're sufferin' from shock and exposure, and yuh've lost considerable blood from them cuts. Yuh need a doctor right away."

"Guess yuh're right, Morgan," the oldster gasped, his face white and drawn. "Ain't as young as I used to be. Nearest sawbones is in Silver Bow, though, and that's nearly twenty miles. My own outfit's seven-eight miles over yonder."

"Twenty miles is too much for a man in yore shape," Morgan said flatly.

"By gannies, I got it!" old Blackjack ex-

claimed. "We'll ride over to Robards' place. It ain't more'n three-four miles over there in the hills, and I'd trust him to patch me up any day more'n I would old Doc Banner!"

THE TALL cowboy looked at him uncertainly.

"Is this Robards a doctor?" he asked.

"No, and I don't rightly know what yuh would call him. He's a queer sort of duck, as yuh'll find out when yuh see him. Lives alone in his cabin up there on Weepin' Woman Creek, with his books and pictures and music and all. He knows a heap about most everything, I reckon, and that goes for doctorin', too. He'll patch up these here scratches."

"Then we'll go to Robards cabin," Morgan promptly decided.

"About the dead man," Blue Hawk suggested softly.

"We'll leave him where he is," Wayne Morgan said. "When Malone gets back to his ranch he can send one of his riders into town to notify the sheriff and tell about what happened."

"I'll do that," Malone agreed. "Though far as I'm concerned Jeb Kurth could stay there and feed the buzzards!"

"Then let's get started," Morgan said crisply. As usual, when he had committed himself to the cause of justice, he was impatient for action. "Malone, you can ride the dead man's hoss. Blue Hawk, I'll see yuh later."

The Yaqui nodded, turned away and went toward his pinto. He knew, without further words, what was expected of him, where he was to meet Wayne Morgan. As he mounted and rode away, his black eyes glowed in eager anticipation of the excitement he knew was coming.

Morgan helped the old rancher into the saddle of the dead killer's horse, himself remounted the powerful roan, and they rode slowly toward the rugged hills that jutted darkly against the crimson sky to the west.

The sun was low. By the time they reached the edge of the hills it was down, and dusky shadows were marching through the ravines and across the timbered slopes. A yellow moon was in the sky, however, lacing the earth underneath the giant pines with silvery threads of light.

They talked but little, for Morgan could see that the old rancher was near the point of exhaustion. Several times Malone swayed in the saddle, and would have fallen if Morgan had not put out a steadying hand.

"Soon be there," Malone said weakly, as they rode along a creek. "Robards' cabin—a quarter-mile ahead."

Even before Wayne Morgan saw the light gleaming in the cabin window, he was aware of a sound in the night that seemed oddly out of place here in this wilderness.

It was the sound of music, of a piano being played by deft and experienced hands, and of a man singing. The music was hauntingly beautiful, seeming to merge with the night and become a part of its soft enchantment, of the wind's pagan whisper in the pines. The man's voice was smooth and mellow.

"Told yuh he was a queer duck, didn't I?" Malone said weakly. "Don't specially like visitors, but he's a friendly cuss for all that. Seems to have plenty money—inherited it, I reckon—and never turns away anybody that needs help. Clayton Robards is his name. He'll fix me up."

They rode on toward the glow of light. As they approached, Morgan saw that the big log cabin, one obviously containing three or four rooms, was in a small clearing beside the creek, in the deep shadows of towering pines. The music and singing continued, seeming to grow smoother and more melodious as they drew nearer.

They rode up and stopped before the cabin. Morgan dismounted, helped the wounded rancher to alight, and they tethered their horses to a tie-bar.

Inside the cabin, the music stopped abruptly. There was a sound of footsteps, and a man appeared in the doorway, outlined against the light behind him.

The man's voice was low, calm, as he asked:

"Who is it, gentlemen?"

"Blackjack Malone, Robards," the rancher said, "and a friend. Can we come in?"

"Of course! You're always welcome."

Robards stepped aside, and Morgan and Malone entered the lighted room. Morgan looked sharply at Robards. The man was tall, with a slender, rather stooped body. He was perhaps in his middle thirties, and his pale features were thin and intelligent looking. His hands were long-fingered, slim, the hands of an artist. Horn-rimmed glasses covered his wide-spaced, dark eyes.

Here, Morgan knew instantly, was a man who bordered on brilliance. Obviously, also, Robards was not a Westerner.

AFTER a brief, disinterested glance at Morgan, Robards turned to Malone.

"You've been hurt, Blackjack," he said, still without interest or curiosity.

Malone shrugged.

"Just a few scratches. I figgered mebbe yuh'd patch me up."

"I'll be glad to do what I can," Robards murmured. "Perhaps it will suffice until you can see a physician."

"Three tough hombres carved me up a little," said the oldster.

"Indeed?" Robards interrupted, almost rudely. "Unfortunately, there is much wickedness and brutality rampant in the world!"

Blackjack gestured toward Wayne Morgan.

"This gent's name is Morgan. He helped save my bacon."

Robards inclined his head politely, nodded briefly, not offering to shake hands.

"I'll heat some water," he said.

The man seemed wholly without surprise or curiosity. He lighted a kerosene stove and put on a basin of water to heat. The basin was oddly-shaped, with strange designs and figures painted on it.

Morgan's interested gaze moved about the room. It was, he had already seen, almost luxuriously furnished. Besides the gleaming piano, it contained various pieces of expensive furniture. A beautiful Oriental rug covered the floor. Vividly-colored curtains framed the windows.

One side of the room was lined with shelves that were loaded with books and magazines. On the walls were many beautiful pictures, some of which Wayne Morgan—himself well-educated and possessed of a considerable knowledge of art, for all of the fact that long ago he had elected to speak in the language of the range—recognized as masterpieces.

Obviously, Clayton Robards had traveled widely, for tables and cabinets were littered with odd and rare items foreign to the West or even to America. Many of the items Morgan recognized as being Oriental. A box of cigars on a table carried the label, "Made in Singapore". Robards had been smoking one of them, and its rich, sweetish aroma filled the room.

Old Blackjack Malone had removed his tattered shirt. Robards washed the dirt-clogged wounds with warm water, then started dabbing them with a brownish liquid. He still had not shown the slightest interest as to the details of how Malone had received his wounds. Beyond answering Malone's questions, he talked little.

When the old rancher started telling how he had been kidnaped and buried in the sand, Robards said abruptly:

"I would rather you did not tell me. It wouldn't help you, and it would distract my mind from my work. I am sorry if you have troubles, naturally. But I am here because I wished to concentrate on my work and studies—where my mind would not be distracted by the world's troubles, its greed and wickedness, and selfishness. You will forgive me?"

"Don't mind me." Malone flinched with pain. "By jacks, though, I'd think yuh'd find it purty lonely."

"Lonely?" Robards smiled, shook his head. "I have my music, my books and pictures. I have beauty and contentment. And you, my friend, have troubles."

"I dang shore have," growled the rancher. "If I just knowed who the skunk was that done this to me he'd plumb certain have his too!"

CHAPTER III

Bodyguard

ALTHOUGH Wayne Morgan's interest had been momentarily sharpened by the eccentric Robards and his luxuriously-furnished cabin, the tall cowboy was impatient to be away. Nothing not directly connected with Blackjack Malone's trouble would hold his interest long now.

He walked restlessly about the room, looking curiously at various objects. Robards paid no attention to him at all.

"Peace and contentment," he heard Robards murmur. "To have these is the highest goal attainable by man. They are in direct conflict with violence and treachery, with which, unfortunately, this earth is rife. Peace is like a beautiful painting, or a lovely song, while violence is a rapacious monster, ugly and unclean, that destroys the soul as well as the body!"

Blackjack glanced at Morgan, shrugged.

"By gannies, mebbe yuh're right," he said to Robards. "Yuh about finished?"

"I have finished," Robards said, and

straightened. "I think the wounds will heal nicely. However, I would advise you to see a physician."

"I'll do it, tomorrer. I'm obliged."

"The pleasure was mine." Robards opened a cabinet drawer, withdrew a bottle and smilingly offered it to Blackjack Malone. "Perhaps this will give you added strength for the ride home."

Malone accepted the bottle with a pleased grunt, withdrew the cork and upended it. He smacked his lips, offered the bottle to Morgan. Morgan shook his head.

"Then I reckon we'll be ridin'," the oldster said.

Robards accompanied them to the door, bade them a pleasant good night, and they mounted and rode southward into the night.

"Queer duck," Blackjack repeated, as they rode along the creek.

"I agree," Morgan said. "But he didn't seem interested in yore troubles. I am. Yuh say yuh don't have any idea who it is that wants yuh killed?"

"I said I didn't know who it was." Blackjack uncorked the bottle again, gulped appreciatively. "I didn't say I ain't got some idea."

"Then yuh suspect somebody?" urged Morgan.

"I shore as Tophet do! Whip Shann hates me, and he's the only man I know of who does. Folks call him Whip because he likes to use a bullwhip. He owns the Anchor outfit, shoulderin' up against my place on the northeast. Five years ago I got the deadwood on Shann and helped send him to the pen for stealin' some of my cattle. He swore he'd get even. After servin' three years of his sentence he was pardoned."

"Yuh got any proof it's Whip Shann behind yore trouble?"

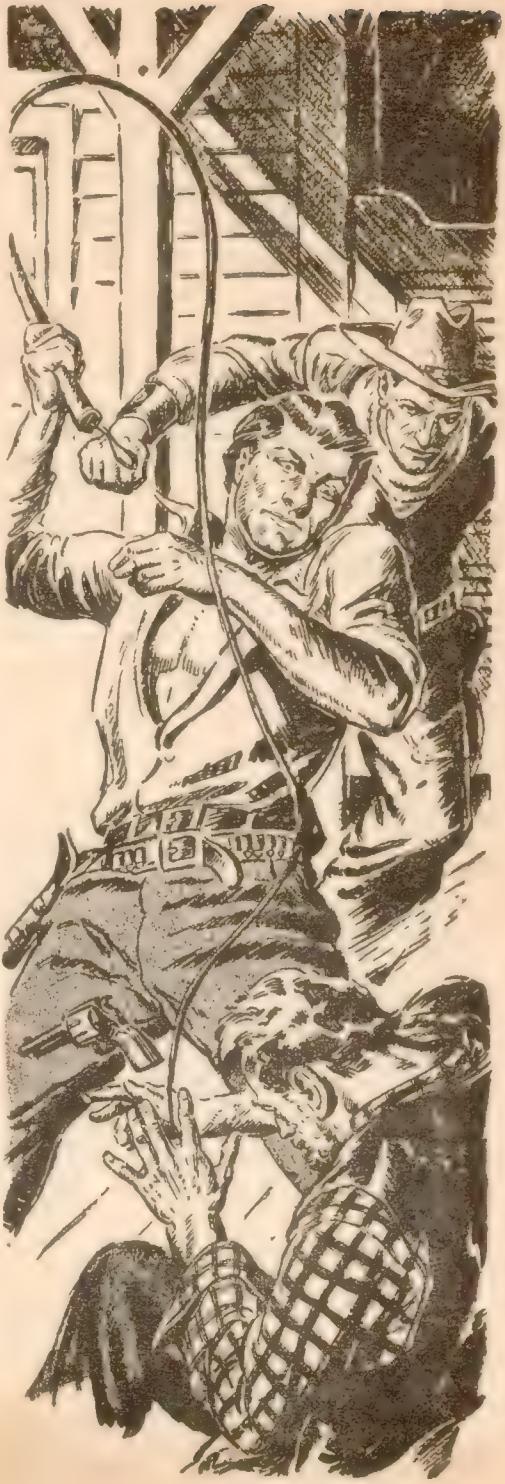
"No, I ain't," the rancher admitted. "But who else'd want to ruin me? Who else'd hate me bad enough to want to do the devilish thing they tried to do to me?"

"Yuh absolutely shore there's not anybody else hates yuh?"

"Yes. Except mebbe—"

"Mebbe who?" Morgan asked sharply, as Blackjack Malone paused.

"Mebbe nobody!" the rancher said harshly. "But yuh did have somebody else in mind.



Shann's bullwhip lashed out, and the tip bit viciously at Blackjack's gun hand (CHAPTER V)

Speak out, Malone. Yuh can trust me to keep my lip buttoned. Who besides Whip Shann might have reason to hate yuh?"

"I've got a boy," Blackjack said, almost defiantly. "His name's Nick. His mother died when he was fourteen, and mebbe I didn't know how to keep a tight rein on the younker. Or mebbe I tried to keep 'em too tight. Anyway, the boy got in with the wrong crowd and turned purty wild. He gambled and drank and fought considerable.

"We had several quarrels over it. Finally, he got into a kind of bad mess. Mebbe I was too hard on him but I—kicked him out. He left, went to Texas. I kept hearin' rumors about Nick, and they didn't make me feel any better. He'd turned into a shore enough gunfighter, and folks down there had nicknamed him Smoke Malone.

"Well, a couple of years ago, Nick came back to the basin. He didn't come to see me—never has—but filed on a little place over yonder on the edge of the hills. So far as I know, the boy's got rid of his wildness. Works hard, and sticks right close to his outfit. But I know there's been some talk."

"That yore own boy hates you for kickin' him out, that he's come back to get even," Morgan said. "Is that right?"

"Yeah! But it's a pack of danged lies, yuh hear me? My boy's just proud, that's the reason he ain't come to see me. And if I wasn't such a stiff-necked old catawampus I'd do somethin' about it."

MORGAN was silent a moment. The rancher, he knew, was not entirely certain of his son's innocence. He was a man trying desperately, but not altogether successfully, to convince himself.

"Anybody else?" Morgan asked gently.

"Nobody else. I admit, Morgan, it's got me up a tree—and the tree's just about chopped down. If I can't get another loan from Harvey Boyd's bank—and I doubt if I can—I'm ruined."

"A loan," Morgan pointed out bluntly, "ain't apt to help yuh unless yuh watch yore self mighty careful."

"That's a fact," Blackjack admitted dismally.

He peered at the tall, wide-shouldered rider in the moonlight, at the twin guns resting snugly against the big man's thighs.

"Morgan," he said, "I've seen how yuh can use them guns. And I'm sayin' plain—I'd like to have yuh on my pay-roll."

"As a bodyguard?" Morgan murmured.

"Call it that if yuh want! I ain't a gunman, Morgan. I ain't a coward, either, but I'd hate to die—at least until this mess is cleared up. Yuh want the job?"

The suggestion suited Wayne Morgan exactly. He had, in fact, intended to ask Malone for just such a job, instead of taking the one Malone had already offered him to punch cows. But he pretended to hesitate.

"I'll have to sleep on it," he said finally. "Yuh say yuh're ridin' into town tomorrow?"

"Yeah—to see Banker Boyd, and Doc Banner too."

"Then I'll ride in with yuh," said Morgan. "I'll show up at yore outfit in the mornin', early."

"Bueno!" A third time old Blackjack upended the bottle, flung it into the underbrush empty. "I'll be expectin' yuh!"

Blackjack Malone swung slightly to the west, while Morgan proceeded along the creek. Twenty minutes later, in a belt of dense timber ahead, he glimpsed the red glow of a campfire.

Morgan grinned, put his head on one side, and from his lips came the snarling, throaty cry of a mountain lion. Instantly, from the direction of the fire, came an answering call, both so amazingly real that most men would have been deceived.

Morgan rode into the circle of firelight. Blue Hawk, the Yaqui, was crouched over the fire, holding a sizzling skillet. Bed-rolls and saddles lay on the ground.

Morgan grinned at his Indian comrade, rode on past the fire and into a little meadow where three tethered horses were grazing. In addition to Blue Hawk's pinto, there was a wiry gray, and a magnificent black stallion. Wayne Morgan left the hammer-headed roan to graze with the other horses and returned to the small clearing that held the fire and camping equipment.

In anticipation of his appearance, Blue Hawk was just finishing the preparation of a savory meal. Morgan washed his hands and face in the icy water of the creek, and they started eating. The Yaqui waited without visible curiosity for what Morgan had to say.

"A job for us, Hawk," Morgan finally said.

"I had already guessed as much, Senor."

Not even Blue Hawk knew Morgan's real name, how his early life had been spent, or where. So always when the Yaqui addressed his white trail-mate it was as Senor."

"Will it be as Wayne Morgan—or the Masked Rider?" Blue Hawk asked.

"Either, or both, as the occasion demands."

He told Blue Hawk all that he had learned from Malone. The Indian listened impassively. But Morgan knew that Blue Hawk was now, as always, eager to fight on the side of right and justice, a course which long ago they had made their own.

These two were inseparable companions, and between them was a strong bond of mutual affection and loyalty.

Wayne Morgan, in his rôle of a drifting cowboy now, one which he alternated with that of a character whose name was a byword throughout the wide West, was dressed in well-worn levis and a gray shirt open at his muscular throat. He wore a brown Stetson. His features were rugged and tanned, his wide mouth good-humored, always ready to grin, and he had a physique which any man might envy.

Blue Hawk was garbed in drill pants and a white shirt, as he had been when he had ridden up on the scene of torture. His scarlet sash, holding a sheathed knife, still encircled his lithe waist. His raven-black hair, falling to his shoulders, still was held in place by a red bandeau about his head. When Blue Hawk had attended Mission school he had taken their teachings seriously, and now in his heart, as in that of Wayne Morgan, was a deep hatred for evil and injustice, accompanied by a fierce determination to fight for the honest and down-trodden whenever opportunity afforded.

WAYNE MORGAN was deadly and swift with the black guns he wore, a tough, indomitable adversary in any kind of fight. The Yaqui was an expert with the rifle he carried in a saddle scabbard, and a cunning, sure fighter with his long-bladed knife. These two, scorning odds and personal danger, had faced death unflinchingly in countless crusading battles the length and breadth of the West—and were ever on the lookout for more.

Morgan, again washing his hands in the creek after eating, suddenly stiffened at Blue Hawk's sharp words:

"Gunshots, Senor!"

Morgan straightened, stood listening. Dim and distant, but unmistakable, came to his ears the sounds of gunfire. Not single, wide-spaced shots, but a series of ragged, drumming explosions like the staccato explosions of firecrackers in a bucket.

The gunfire came from the southwest—from the direction of Blackjack Malone's Broken Bell outfit. Plainly as a spoken word, it told the two that evil was afoot in the night.

"Our job starts sooner than we expected, Hawk!" Morgan said grimly. "Unless I'm mistaken, this is work for the Masked Rider. Bring the hosses!"

"Yes, Senor!" the Yaqui exclaimed, and leaped like a dark panther from the firelight and toward the meadow where the horses were grazing.

Wayne Morgan leaped to his bed-roll. From it he took a long black cloak, which he draped over his wide shoulders. Over his eyes he fastened a black domino mask. A black sombrero replaced the brown Stetson.

Within the space of a few seconds, Wayne Morgan, drifting cowboy, had been transformed into the famous Masked Rider, legendary Robin Hood outlaw of the danger trails whose gun-wizardry and reckless courage were known over all the West.

The Masked Rider, champion of the oppressed and down-trodden, implacable foe of evil and injustice! Branded a merciless killer by some, a saint by others, this daring, black-garbed rider of the dim trails was apt to appear suddenly and unexpectedly wherever wickedness threatened the righteous.

Sided always by his daring Yaqui partner, Blue Hawk, in his deadly forays against evildoers he had become known far and wide. Tales of his exploits were told from Canada to the Rio Grande, from California to the Mississippi. And because some of those he fought had been crooked lawmen, or had crooked lawmen for friends who had boldly taken his name on various occasions, he had been branded in many places as a lawless renegade, with a fortune in bounties on his head.

But not even this could swerve him from his unflinching determination to aid the oppressed, to fight without mercy those who sought to rob and destroy.

No man alive, except Blue Hawk, knew that the Masked Rider and the drifting cowboy, Wayne Morgan, were the same man. No man even suspected such a thing, and neither torture nor all the earth's riches could have torn the secret from the Yaqui.

Well educated, but speaking always in

the drawling idiom of the land he loved, the Masked Rider had never spoken of his past even to Blue Hawk. And not even Blue Hawk knew why, without desire for thanks or monetary reward, the Robin Hood rider had dedicated his life to the cause of justice.

Not in all the West was there a more deadly or courageous fighter. And second only to him in daring and in hatred for oppression, was his Yaqui comrade, Blue Hawk.

The Masked Rider had no more than donned his garb when Blue Hawk led two horses into the firelight. One of them was the wiry gray the Indian rode. The other was the powerful, long-legged black stallion, Midnight, ridden always by the man in black, and by him alone. When that daredevil masked figure bestrode the great stallion, the mount seemed almost instinctively to sense his rider's every wish. They made an unbeatable team.

SWIFTLY the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk flung blankets and saddles onto their horses, leaped into saddles. The stallion reared on his hind feet, wheeled, pawing the air, then leaped forward and out of the circle of firelight, its rider's cape billowing outward like giant dark wings. He was followed closely by Blue Hawk on the gray.

They crashed through the belt of timber, with low limbs hammering and tugging at them, and into a long, narrow meadow. They could still hear the ragged pounding of the guns in the night. The sounds grew steadily louder as they raced recklessly through the moonlight.

They drove through another dark belt of timber, and on to more open range.

"A fire, Senor!" the Yaqui called. "It is certain that El Diablo himself is abroad this night!"

The Masked Rider had already spotted the angry red glow rising against the dark sky before them. Momentarily, the gunfire had stopped, and the man in black wondered if they were too late to intervene in whatever was happening.

With a soft word he urged Midnight to greater speed. The great stallion responded instantly, seeming literally to fly over the ground.

"Keep on prodding!" Morgan called to Blue Hawk. "But watch out for a bushwhack trap. The hombres who set the fire might be around." The speed of their broncs would make them hard targets, Morgan knew.

CHAPTER IV

Hooded Riders in the Night

THE wind thundered in the ears of the masked man and his Indian trail-mate. The crimson glow grew brighter—and suddenly they could see leaping, writhing yellow flames. The gunfire had started up again.

Now the Masked Rider could see that it was a house burning. Not the Broken Bell ranchhouse, he knew, but more likely a line cabin. The whole structure was ablaze, lighting the vicinity with a weird, unearthly glow.

Suddenly, racing past the burning cabin, he saw two riders. The heads of the riders were covered with hoodlike affairs that reached their shoulders, probably gunnysacks. They raced into deeper shadows, where the Masked Rider could see sharp, flowerlike bursts of flame which he knew were exploding guns.

Then, as he drew closer, he saw what was happening. Half a dozen of the hooded riders were spurring their mounts too and fro among a herd of cattle. Their guns were blazing and roaring.

With rage welling inside him, the Masked Rider realized that the raiders were deliberately shooting down the cattle. Even now the vicinity was dotted with cattle already down, either dead or writhing in agony. Those still on their feet were a bawling, confused mass.

Twin guns in hand, scorning the odds against him, the Robin Hood rider drove straight at the brutal marauders. Blue Hawk, on the gray, was only a few yards behind him. The masked man's guns blasted twin streams of flame and lead.

One of the raiders cursed, swayed drunkenly, but grabbed at the saddle-horn and stayed in saddle. The others were thrown into instant confusion. They whirled, facing their attackers.

"It's the Law!" one of them yelled. "Let's get out of here!"

"It's not the Law!" another voice bawled. "It's the Masked Rider! Let him have it!"

Wicked red lances of fire stabbed the night. Lead snarled past the masked man's head. But the leaping, wildly racing black stallion and its cloaked rider made an elusive target. Blue Hawk was coming up, his Winchester flaming.

A hooded rider threw up his arms and tumbled headlong to the ground. The frightened, milling cattle swirled over him, hiding him from view, their hoofs trampling him. The others gave ground, their guns beating a devil's tattoo in the night.

As if at an unspoken order, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk swerved their mounts at opposite angles, one going to the right, the other to the left, thereby catching the startled raiders in a deadly cross-fire. The outlaws fought back like cornered rats, lead from their guns slashing the air perilously close to the black-garbed rider and his Yaqui companion.

Another raider yelled, with pain and surprise, proof that he had been hit. A horse screamed, reared, flailing the air with its hoofs. But the wounded animal held its feet, and when its forefeet hit the ground it bolted with its rider.

Obviously, the night raiders had no stomach for this sort of deadly, merciless gunfight.

"We ain't paid to get killed!" a harsh voice cried out. "And wasn't nothin' said about fightin' the Masked Rider, either. I'm gettin' out of here!"

The remaining four killers whirled their horses and spurred wildly after the bolting mount of their companion.

"After 'em Hawk!" the Masked Rider cried, his voice harsh with righteous anger. "Get as many of the lobos as yuh can!"

But the milling cattle had swirled in between the two avengers and the fleeing killers, blocking their path. By the time they threaded their way through the frightened herd, the raiders were well out of gun range.

The Masked Rider reached the edge of the herd first. Driven by his fierce urge to take as great a toll of the cattle killers as he could, he urged Midnight forward in swift pursuit.

But suddenly, from off to his right, a compact, swiftly moving body of horsemen swept out of the night and in between him and the raiders. A soft word brought the big stallion back on its haunches. If these were reenforcements for the raiders, the odds would be too great.

"There's one of the skunks, Sheriff!" yelled one of the advancing riders, and the masked man guessed correctly that these men were members of a sheriff's posse.

OBVIOUSLY, with the glare from the burning cabin in their eyes, the possemen had not seen the fleeing raiders. But against that crimson glow the black stallion and its cloaked rider were outlined starkly. The possemen swerved their horses and drove straight at him.

The Masked Rider flung a glance over his shoulder. Blue Hawk, no doubt correctly gauging this sudden turn of events, had faded back out of sight. The Masked Rider holstered his hot guns, but held his ground, awaiting the oncoming riders.

Any second he expected a deadly hail of lead. But no shots came.

The riders, perhaps a dozen in all, thundered up to him, swirled about him. They were a grim-faced lot, and every man had a gun in his hand. One of them grabbed at the bridle bit of the stallion. The great black horse reared, a sound that was almost a growl in his throat, flailing wickedly with his forefeet.

"Better stay back, gents, if yuh want to stay healthy!" the masked man said curtly. "And yuh won't need the hardware."

"We'll be the judge of that, Masked

[*Turn page*]

Rider!" growled a big, blond, square-faced man who wore a sheriff's star on his vest. He glowered about at the dead cattle. "Looks like yuh made another good job of it!"

"Yuh think I done all this?" demanded the masked man.

"What else am I supposed to think?" snapped the lawman. "Likely yuh had help. If yuh did, they got away. But we've got you cold!"

"So it would seem," the Masked Rider agreed calmly. "And who're you?"

"Sheriff Ben Paris, from Silver Bow. Figgered somethin' like this might happen agin, so for the last week me and my men've been layin' for you skunks. Didn't strike where I'd figgered though. We got here quick as we could after we heard the shootin' and saw the fire."

"Yuh're makin' a bad mistake, Sheriff," the Masked Rider said. "If I'd done this would I have stayed here and let yuh capture me so easy? The guilty men rode away just as yuh got here. Yuh almost rode 'em down, but I reckon yuh didn't see 'em."

Two or three of the possemen laughed. There was open disbelief in the square-faced sheriff's voice as he demanded:

"Then what're you doin' here?"

"Like you men, I was nearby, heard the shots and came to investigate."

"And I reckon yuh found all these steers committin' suicide?"

"No!" Sharp, cold anger had crept into the Masked Rider's voice. "I found six men, with some kind of hoods over their heads, ridin' among the cattle and shootin' 'em down. I jumped 'em, and there was a little ruckus. If yuh think I'm lyin', yuh'll find one of the raiders layin' right over yonder on the ground, dead!"

Sheriff Ben Paris looked sharply at the masked man, his gaze following the Robin Hood rider's pointing finger. The herd had shifted, and at its outer edge there was plainly visible a dark, motionless figure on the ground.

"We'll have a look-see!" the lawman rumbled.

The entire group, still hemming the Masked Rider, rode over to the still figure. Ben Paris dismounted, knelt beside the man, straightened.

"Dead, all right!"

"Yuh recognize him, Sheriff?" asked one of the possemen.

Sheriff Paris stooped again, slid the tattered gunny-sack from the dead man's head. He swore softly, took a backward step, his face pale in the dim light.

The raider's face had been slashed and battered into a shapeless pulp by the steers' trampling hoofs!

"No way of recognizin' this jasper," declared the sheriff grimly. "But that don't let you out, Masked Rider. Likely he was a pard of yores. Mebbe his bronc throwed him and the steers trampled him before he could get away from 'em."

The sheriff whirled as a rider pounded up on an exhausted horse. Instantly the Masked Rider recognized old Blackjack Malone. The rancher's bearded face was pale, distorted by harsh anger and despair as he stared about at the dead cattle.

"So the snakes've hit me agin!" he raged. "Yuh see who done it, Sheriff? Tell me, and I'll send the slimy sidewinder to Hades bareback!"

"We ain't shore, Blackjack," Sheriff Paris said doubtfully. "When we got here all we found was this dead gent, and the Masked Rider here. He claims he's innocent."

BLACKJACK MALONE whirled, peering at the black-garbed rider who sat straight and calm on the great stallion.

"The Masked Rider, eh? I've heard of him. But I never heard of him doin' honest folks dirt. I hear he always fights on the side of law and justice."

"I've heard different," growled the lawman. "He's wanted on a dozen different counts. He killed a sheriff over in Wyomin'."

"If he did," yawped old Blackjack, "then said sheriff was probably as crooked as a bunch of eels fightin' in a cane patch!"

Some of the possemen grinned. The Masked Rider sat quietly, watching, listening. Such divergent opinions as those of the sheriff and Blackjack Malone as to the qualities—or lack of them—of the Masked Rider, were common throughout the West. Some saw him as he really was, a veritable Robin Hood of the Range. Others believed him to be a lawless, heartless killer and thief.

"I'm layin' my money the Masked Rider didn't do this!" old Blackjack said heatedly.

"Then mebbe yuh got some idea who did?" challenged the sheriff.

"Mebbe I have! If I was lookin' for somebody with steer blood on his hands and snake blood in his veins, I wouldn't ride no farther than Whip Shann's Anchor outfit!"

"That's a plumb stiff charge, Blackjack," said Ben Paris. "Yuh got any proof to back it up?"

"No, by jacks, I ain't! But, so far as I know, ain't anybody else hates me enough to do such a thing."

"I wouldn't be too shore about that!"

"Meanin' what, Paris?" Blackjack shot at him belligerently.

"Seems to me yore own son, Nick, ain't got much reason to love yuh. He's—"

"I hear my name mentioned, gents?" drawled a cold, sardonic voice.

The Masked Rider pivoted in his saddle. Still another rider, unnoticed in the heat of the argument over the Masked Rider, had approached the group and sat slouched in his saddle, a hand carelessly near the butt of the .45 he wore.

Here, the Masked Rider knew, was Blackjack Malone's wildling son, Nick.

There was a moment of deep, almost shocked silence, which gave the masked man opportunity for a quick study of Nick Malone —or "Smoke" Malone, as he had become known on the Texas gun trails.

Nick bore slight resemblance to his father. He was of medium height, but solid, powerful. His features were dark, hawkish, carrying a set expression of either cruelty or cynicism. A half-smile of contempt curled his thin lips as he faced the silent group.

"Seems like I heard my name mentioned, didn't I?" the dark rider repeated.

"Reckon yuh did, Nick," Sheriff Paris said bluntly. "Likely it ain't the first time it's been mentioned, either."

"By lyin' tongues, and behind my back!" His dark eyes swept the vicinity. "What's happened here?"

"See for yoreself—if yuh don't already know!"

"Blast yuh, sheriff, some day that tongue of yores'll come unhinged one time too many!" Nick Malone spat, hand darting to the butt of his six-shooter.

The big sheriff swung quickly to face him, hand dropping to his own gun. For an instant death crouched like a black panther about to spring.

Then the Masked Rider suddenly spurred Midnight between the two. A killing here would only complicate matters. About Nick Malone he was uncertain, but Sheriff Ben Paris, he was sure, was on the level.

"Hold it, you two!" he snapped. "Sheriff, seems to me yuh're all mixed up. Five minutes ago, yuh was accusin' me of doin' this. Now yuh seem to think it was this gent."

The sheriff shrugged.

"Mebbe I do talk too much," he said apologetically. "Sorry, Nick."

"Yuh ought to be," old Blackjack growled. "Nick, you know I don't believe such stuff, don't yuh?"

Nick looked at his father, his dark face unsmiling, expressionless.

"Don't you?" he asked. "I wouldn't know."

"I've got to suspect somebody," the sheriff declared doggedly. "How yuh cotton onto this happenin', Nick?"

"Mebbe I was prowlin' about, expectin' the killers to make another raid on Broken Bell cattle," Nick said sneeringly. "And mebbe I wasn't. Mebbe it's my business—unless I'm under arrest."

"No, I reckon not," said the sheriff. "But shore as my name's—"

"Look out!" one of the possemen suddenly shouted. "Them steers are headed straight this way!"

THE men, engrossed in the talk, had forgotten the still restless herd at their backs. Now, at the warning yell, every man whirled his horse. The drumming pound of many hoofs shook the earth. For some unexplained reason the herd had started milling again, was now headed at a shambling run straight toward the compact group of riders. The long, curved horns of the steers swung murderously from side to side as they ran.

"Get out of the way, you jiggers!" the sheriff bawled. "They're stampedin'!"

The riders scattered like a covey of quail, spurring wildly. Only the Masked Rider saw the lone horseman behind the herd, riding to and fro, swaying, yelling, flailing the rumps of the frightened steers with a branch from a tree.

Blue Hawk, as the Mask Rider had expected, was giving him his chance to escape!

He promptly took advantage of the opportunity, swerving Midnight and racing unnoticed at an angle from the others toward a pine grove a hundred yards away. He had almost reached the timber before he was discovered.

A voice yelled out, a gun bellowed its red wrath into the night, the bullet snarling wasplike over the Masked Rider's head. But the next instant he gained the concealing

shadows of the timber and headed for the camp beside Weeping Woman Creek, knowing that Blue Hawk would join him there.

The righteous anger was still hot inside him as he rode. Here on this range, he knew, was more than mystery and treachery. Here was stark murder, evil at its blackest. And such corroding blights could not long remain on the same range with the avenging, black-garbed rider and his Yaqui companion!

CHAPTER V

Silver Bow

MOUNTED on the hammer-headed roan, Wayne Morgan reached the Broken Bell Ranch at mid-morning. The big, two-storied ranchhouse, the outbuildings and corrals, all were in an excellent state of repair. The Broken Bell, the tall cowboy knew, was a big outfit, its fertile acres extending well into the foothills to the west. As Blackjack Malone had said, the place should have been making money.

Blackjack was obviously relieved at Morgan's appearance. He insisted on the cowboy coming into the ranchhouse and having a drink.

"Then we'll head for town," he said. "Harvey Boyd, the banker, is my friend, but I don't have much hopes of gettin' another bank loan, because the outfit's already loaded with about all it'll stand. But after last night I shore need a loan worse than ever."

Morgan pretended quick interest.

"Somethin' else wrong?"

Blackjack poured the drinks.

"Another forty head of cattle killed by night riders," he said angrily. "I was nearly home last night, after leavin' you, when I heard shots off to the north and saw a fire. I could tell it was a line shack up there. Just yesterday we'd rounded up a hundred head of prime beef steers, aimin' to drive 'em to the loadin' chutes in Silver Bow. A couple of my boys was holdin' 'em over there last night, close to water. Well, when I heard the shots I knew the devil was to pay. When I got there I found forty head dead."

He explained in detail what had happened afterward, details with which Morgan was already familiar. Except for one thing.

"What happened to the two guards?" he asked.

"One of 'em dead, the other bad hurt, in a ravine out beyond the burned shack," Blackjack told him. "Reckon they didn't have a chance. If it hadn't been for the Masked Rider I might have lost the whole herd. Ben Paris claimed the Masked Rider was back of the whole thing, but I told him that was poppycock. What you think, Morgan?"

"I agree with yuh," Morgan said quickly. "I've heard of the Masked Rider. In fact, I've been in places where he worked and seen him. He might go against the law sometimes, for the law ain't always straight, but never against right and justice."

"Way I figger it," agreed the rancher. "Well, I could shore use his help."

"If he's on this range, yuh'll probably get it," assured Morgan.

"I'm afraid it's too late, though," Blackjack muttered, strapping a gun about his thin waist. "My back's to the wall. If only the Lily Belle just hadn't petered out!"

"The Lily Belle?" Morgan asked. "Sounds like a mine."

"It is—or was. On my property, over on the edge of the hills. Struck pay dirt, accidently, nearly twenty years ago. Thought it was goin' to make me rich. Had a lot of machinery brought in, put down a shaft. Tunneled about in the earth like a lot of fool moles for five years, then closed her down."

"Didn't pan out, eh?"

"Oh, there was some gold there all right. But not enough to pay the expense of workin' it. Low-grade ore. Kept thinkin' we'd run into high-grade, but we never did. Sunk five years of cow profits in that hole. Had some experts out from Denver and they said she'd never pay. So I closed her down and boarded up the shaft. Most of the machinery's still there, though. Sort of brings back memories of Lily Belle. She was my wife."

It was almost mid-day when they left the Broken Bell, near mid-afternoon when they reached Silver Bow. Silver Bow had little to set it apart from scores of other cowtowns Wayne Morgan had seen. A single, dusty street was flanked on both sides by false-fronted frame buildings. The bank building was the only brick structure in town.

They left their horses at the livery, walked along the plank walk. They came even with a two-story frame building which carried the garish sign across its false front that read:

RAINBOW BAR

"I could use another drink before bracin'

Harvey Boyd," Blackjack suggested.

Morgan agreed, and they entered the saloon. The room was big, containing poker tables and a mahogany bar at one side. At the back of the room was an archway opening into another large room that obviously was a dancehall. At the rear of this second room was a rude platform.

They went to the bar and ordered drinks. Blackjack smacked his lips.

"Now let me at that curly-tailed banker!" he said, and led the way determinedly through the batwings, followed by Morgan.

red-haired, with hard, wedge-shaped features and cold yellowish eyes. He was not tall, but was incredibly broad and powerful-looking. Reddish hair sprouted from the backs of his blunt-fingered hands. Draped over his shoulders the man carried a long-lash bullwhip, one of those powerful hands gripping its stock.

Instinctively, Morgan knew that here was "Whip" Shann.

Shann stood braced on columnar legs, glaring venomously at the oldster, hatred and the cruel lust for violence in his eyes.

BLUE HAWK

As Blackjack went out, another man had started in, and the two collided rather violently. The bantamlike oldster was knocked sideward, almost fell, but regained his balance.

"I'm plumb sorry, hombre—" he began, then his teeth snapped together, and he glared truculently at the man with whom he had collided.

Morgan, close behind Malone, had seen what happened. It had been the fault of neither man, and ordinarily would have passed with a light apology from both. But he saw instantly that, instead of apologies, there was apt to be quick violence.

The man Blackjack had bumped into was

"Why don't yuh stay out of my way, yuh lyin' old polecat?" he snarled.

"Polecat, am I?" Blackjack blared. "Blast yuh, Whip Shann, yuh thievin' coyote, keep yore tongue off me! Forty head of my cattle was killed last night, and I got an idea yuh know who done it!"

"That's a scabby lie!" Shann spat.

Shann suddenly stepped forward, swung his fist savagely against Blackjack Malone's face. Blackjack staggered backward, hung his bootheel on the plank walk, sprawled backward into the dusty street.

The old rancher rolled over, shaking his head and spitting dust. Blood trickled from a corner of his mouth. Rage distorted his

bearded face.

He reared suddenly to his knees, snatched at his old gun.

As the gun cleared leather, Shann's right hand flashed back, then forward. The bullwhip lashed out, uncoiling like a striking snake. The tip of the lash bit viciously at Blackjack's gun hand. Blackjack grunted with pain, and the gun fell into the dust.

"I'll show yuh, yuh lyin' old hellion!" Shann said wickedly. "I'll cut yuh to pieces!"

The lash snaked out again, its beaded tip slashing murderously at the oldster's cheek. Shann's hand flashed back again.

But Morgan had seen enough. He leaped forward, seized Shann's wrist, twisted mightily. A less powerful man would have been flung into the dust, his arm dislocated. Shann was spun about, and he stagged several steps, but retained his hold on the whip.

"That's enough, Shann!" Morgan said flatly. "It was as much yore fault as his. Let him alone!"

Shann's reaction was quick and violent.

"So you want some of it, too, yuh blasted drifter!" he snarled, and the lash uncoiled again, aimed straight at Morgan's eyes.

But Morgan had expected that. He ducked, hearing the snakelike hiss of the lash an inch from his head as his powerful legs drove him forward. His fist smashed solidly into the red-haired man's rocklike face.

Shann reeled backward, tried to regain his balance, but Morgan was driving in again, hard, without mercy. He hit Shann again, savagely, a chopping, murderous blow. Shann was whirled completely about. He took two staggering steps and fell forward into the dusty street.

But his stamina was amazing. He rolled over, clawed to his knees, focusing his hate-filled eyes on Morgan. Then he snatched at his gun.

"Hold it, Shann, if yuh want to live!" snapped Morgan.

Whip Shann froze motionless, his gun only half-drawn. He was staring into the twin muzzles of Morgan's black guns.

Men had run from the saloon, others were converging from distant parts of the town. Now square-faced Sheriff Ben Paris ran up, gun in hand.

"What'n blazes is goin' on here?" he yelled. "Break it up, you two. Cowboy, put up them guns!"

Morgan readily holstered his guns. However, he still watched Shann warily. Shann had got to his feet. He was cursing in a low, vicious monotone.

"Shut up, Whip!" the sheriff ordered. "Yuh've been warned about startin' trouble here in town."

"I didn't start it," Shann growled. "That old puma there started it. Him and this cowboy."

"That's another cussed lie!" Blackjack yelled. "Shann begun it!"

WHIP SHANN spat a curse, ran at the oldster. Ben Paris leaped between them, brandishing his pistol.

"Shut up, all of yuh," he bellowed, "or I'll fling the whole bunch in jail! Whip, you get out of town and don't come back today. You others get back to yore whisky and poker!"

Obviously the big sheriff's word was law in Silver Bow. Whip Shann, scowling murderously, wheeled and stalked to his horse at a nearby hitchrack. He mounted and spurred out of town. The bystanders gradually melted away, leaving only Blackjack, Morgan and the sheriff.

"Now what was the trouble about?" the sheriff asked Morgan.

Briefly, Morgan told him. Paris looked shrewdly at the tall cowboy.

"Yuh're the drifter that dug Blackjack out of the sand yesterday, ain't yuh?" he asked.

"That's right. But I'm ridin' for the Broken Bell now, and I couldn't stand by and see my boss cut to pieces."

"Yuh've already earned a month's pay," Blackjack declared.

The sheriff shrugged wearily.

"Well, you two go on about yore business and behave yoreselves. All this mystery and vi'lence has about wore me out."

He walked away, and Morgan and Blackjack angled across toward the bank. Blackjack, plainly showing his liking and admiration for Morgan, insisted that Morgan accompany him in his attempt to get another loan from the bank.

Five minutes later they were seated in the simply furnished office of the bank president, Harvey Boyd, in a small room in the front part of the bank. Boyd sat behind a big scarred desk, smoking an expensive cigar.

He was a big, well-dressed man, middle-aged and gray at the temples. His features were broad, good-natured, his gray mustache close-cropped. His pale eyes were shrewd, calculating, appraising, as befitted a banker.

He shook hands pleasantly with Morgan,

offered both visitors a cigar. Obviously the banker and Blackjack were on friendly terms. But even before Blackjack asked for the loan, Morgan knew he would not get it.

"I hear you've been having more trouble, Blackjack," Boyd said regretfully as all three men sat down. "I'm sorry to hear that. I can't understand it. Rustling, yes. But this cattle killing. And why should they pick on you?"

"Somebody's after my scalp," Blackjack declared. "They near got it yesterday, too. If it hadn't been for Morgan here I'd of been a goner. The skunks carved me up some as it was. Robards done a good job of patchin' me up."

"Robards?" The banker frowned as if puzzled, tapping ashes from his cigar into an ivory ash-tray. "Oh, you mean the queer customer living over on Weeping Woman Creek!"

"Queer's right," Wayne Morgan said quickly. "Some of his ideas are more than queer. Has Robards been in to see yuh lately?"

"No, I haven't seen him for weeks. I understand he visits town only when he needs supplies. Not very sociable, I understand. Doesn't like visitors."

"He's all right." Blackjack stirred uneasily. "But about this business of ours. Boyd, I need me another loan from yore bank!"

The banker was silent a moment, tapping the desk top with his well-kept fingertips.

"Blackjack," he said then bluntly, "the bank can't loan you any more money on your outfit. You didn't expect it to, I know. Your place is mortgaged for every dollar it will stand." He raised his hand, as Blackjack opened his mouth to speak. "Yes, I know—you're facing bankruptcy, ruin. But I don't have full authority to grant loans, and I would be dishonest if I risked other peoples' money on investments I knew to be unsound. You can see those things, can't you?"

Malone's face was pale, his thin shoulders slumped.

"Yeah, I can see that," he muttered. "And I really didn't expect to get the loan. But I had to try. Well, I reckon I'll make out somehow." He rose from his chair. "Yuh ready to meander, Morgan?"

"Reckon so," Wayne Morgan drawled. "It was hard luck not to get the loan, but perhaps you can raise it somewhere else."

"Where else?" the banker asked quickly.

"I don't know," Blackjack said bitterly.

CHAPTER VI

Death in the Dark

GETTING to his feet, Wayne Morgan placed the butt of his half-smoked cigar in the ivory ashtray. As he did, his fingers cunningly extracted a small object from the ashes and other butts in the tray. Carelessly he slid his hand—and the object—into his pocket. Then he turned, to follow Blackjack to the door.

"Just a moment," the banker said, and both men stopped, looked around inquiringly.

"Blackjack, we're long-time friends," Boyd said, getting to his feet. "I've got faith in you. I can't make you a bank loan, but I can, and will, make you a small personal loan—enough to pull you through, if you don't have any more hard luck."

Blackjack grinned broadly.

"By jacks, Harvey, that's white of yuh. Er—I didn't expect that. You shore it won't mis-put yuh?"

"I can stand it," Boyd answered as he smiled. "But I can't arrange it before tomorrow. You come in then and I'll fix you up. You intend to ride back to Broken Bell tonight?"

"Meant to."

"I wouldn't. It's getting late. Besides its being unnecessary trouble, I have selfish motives. I've got to protect my investment. Seriously, Blackjack, if somebody wants to kill you—and that seems obvious—then you would be safer here in town tonight."

"Mebbe yuh're right," Blackjack agreed doubtfully. "What you think, Morgan?"

"Might be a good idea," Morgan said readily.

"Then I'll get a room at the hotel."

"No!" Boyd shook his head. "A hotel wouldn't be my idea of a safe place. I have plenty of room at my house—live there alone except for an old housekeeper, you know. Put up there tonight, and tomorrow we'll fix up the loan."

"By gannies, Harvey, I never will cuss a banker agin," Blackjack said huskily. "I'll just do that. Morgan, you ridin' back to the ranch tonight?"

"No, I'll stay here in town and ride out with yuh tomorrow, if it suits yuh."

"Suits me fine. Well, let's go hunt us a drink!"

They left the bank and went out into the street. Wayne Morgan was frowning slightly with puzzlement as he fingered the object in his pocket. . . .

Several hours later Morgan stood at the bar in the Rainbow Bar and slowly sipped his drink of rye whisky. With the coming of night, Silver Bow had awakened to brawling life. The saloons were crowded and noisy. Punchers swaggered along the street. An unpleasant odor of whisky and smoke and perspiration filled the air.

Morgan, though seemingly indolent, missed nothing.

The poker tables were filled. Tinny music blared from the adjoining dancehall, and loud-mouthed, strutting punchers swung overpainted, underdressed girls about the room. It was a familiar pattern to Morgan, but still interesting. Here was the West, lusty, arrogant, quick with a laugh or a blow, an empire being born.

Time was heavy on Wayne Morgan's hands. Since leaving Blackjack Malone about dark, when Blackjack had left with Harvey Boyd to go to the banker's home on the edge of town, he had wandered restlessly about Silver Bow. He was eager for action, but knew that his job was to stay close to Malone, since he could not do that now, for the last hour he had been here in the Rainbow Bar, the biggest and gaudiest saloon in town, while he kept his eyes and ears open.

Suddenly the saloon was strangely quiet. The tinny music had stopped in the adjoining room. The dancers had become still, their talk muted. The card players had frozen to immobility, their heads lifted as if in expectancy.

Then a new sound came from the dancehall. Smooth, mellow strains from a violin. Almost instantly the violin was joined by the voice of a girl, singing. And, like the notes from the violin, the girl's voice was mellow, smooth, as sweet as a cool mountain wind whispering through dark pines. There seemed to be no other sound in the entire house.

Unnoticed, Wayne Morgan left the bar and walked softly to the archway connecting the room.

On the platform at one side of the room stood a girl, playing the violin and singing. She was slender, dark-haired, breathtakingly beautiful. Unlike the scantily clad dancehall girl, she wore a simple, full-skirted dress that enhanced rather than concealed her feminine charms. In her raven-black hair was a crimson rose.

MORGAN could never have told what she sang. All he knew was that her voice was soft, husky, hauntingly beautiful. It was the sun and wind, and the murmur of water in darkness, and the gleam of moonlight on far mountain peaks.

Morgan looked at the faces in the room. The men, many of them drunk, were still no longer arrogant, swaggering. The faces of the dancehall girls, under their paint, had softened. When the song ended, the building shook with applause.

The dark-eyed girl sang two more songs. And then, laughingly shaking her head as her listeners begged for more, she handed the violin to an oldster and stepped down from the platform. A pimply youth sat down at a piano, and the tinny, unmelodious music started up again.

Several punchers started eagerly toward the girl. A tall cowboy got there first, she held up her arms, and the tall cowboy swung her out onto the dance floor. The girl danced as she played and sang—smoothly, gracefully.

She smiled and spoke to those in the room as she glided past, her manner free and friendly, as if this were a nightly occurrence. And yet there was that about her which set her apart from the other dancers as certainly as if she had been a white sheep among a flock of black ones.

After she had danced with several punchers, Morgan entered the room and maneuvered so that he would be near her when the music stopped.

When this happened, he touched her lightly on the arm.

"May I have the honor of this dance, miss?" he asked softly.

She looked up at him quickly and smiled.

"Certainly, Wayne Morgan," she said.

"I'm afraid yuh've got the best of me, Miss—" he said, concealing his surprise.

"Rose Demming," she said, and laughed softly. "A lot of people have learned your name since you manhandled Whip Shann this morning. In fact, you're almost notorious!"

The music started. Morgan slid his arm about her slender waist and, himself an excellent dancer, guided her across the dance floor. She was light and graceful as a fawn, and as wildly beautiful. Questions rioted through Morgan's mind.

She lifted her dark head, looked smilingly up at him.

"Go ahead, ask me," she said.

"I—er—ask yuh what?" he stammered, taken aback.

"What I'm doing in this place. Tell me I don't belong here, that I ought to marry some nice cowboy and raise a family."

"All right, yuh should. And what are yuh doin' here?"

"Playing and singing, as you just saw. I do it for a living. I dance like this afterwards because I want people to like me, and because I like to. Any more questions, Mr. Morgan?"

"Nope!" He grinned down at her. "Anybody ever tell yuh yuh was pretty as a spotted calf in a painted corral?"

"Yes, lots of times. In a nice way, of course. I hear you've taken a job with Blackjack Malone."

"That's right. Cantankerous old hellion."

"I agree with that. I heard also that you rescued him from almost certain death yesterday. Do you have any idea who was behind it?"

Morgan felt a queer urgency behind the question.

"Mebbe Whip Shann," he said bluntly. "Mebbe his own son, Nick."

He felt her slim body stiffen. She was no longer smiling as she looked up at him.

"That's a crazy idea!" she said angrily. "I hoped you had more brains than some of the others. Nick wouldn't hurt his father!"

She broke off suddenly. But the smile didn't return to her red lips and her young body remained tense.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Yuh needn't be. And mebbe it is a crazy idea. How long yuh been in love with Nick Malone, Rose?"

There was a startled look in her eyes.

"What gave you that crazy idea?"

Morgan shrugged and grinned.

"Because I see Nick's in love with you, or he wouldn't be scowlin' at me like he'd enjoy slittin' my throat!" he said softly.

Rose's dark eyes followed the almost imperceptible jerk of Morgan's head. Nick Malone stood in the archway, watching them, frowning blackly.

Jealousy and hostility were plain in his smoldering dark eyes.

When the jangly music stopped they were only a few feet from young Malone. He stepped quickly forward.

"Hello, Nick," the girl said. "This is Wayne Morgan."

Nick nodded curtly.

"I've heard of him," he said.

"I'm ridin' for yore father's outfit," Morgan said smoothly. "Mebbe we'll be seein' a lot of each other."

"I've just seen all of yuh I crave to see!" Nick said shortly.

"Meanin' what?"

"Meanin', if Rose needs a dancin' partner, hombre, I'll do the dancin'. Stay away from her!"

"Why, Nick!" the girl protested. "You've been drinking!"

"Mebbe I have," he said sulkily. "But what I said still goes!"

WAYNE MORGAN was not afraid of Nick Malone. There was little doubt in his mind that he could best the sullen young rancher in any kind of fight. But he didn't want that fight, not just now.

"I'm shore sorry, Malone, if I got my rope tangled wrong," he said apologetically. "It won't happen agin."

He turned abruptly, strode into the barroom.

He went to the bar and ordered a drink. Several men lined the splattered bar. Next to Morgan stood a seedy-looking, weak-faced man with the look of a typical saddle tramp about him. The man, loose-lipped and almost chinless, was drunk. Morgan paid him slight attention as he gave his order.

"This girl Rose's got a nice voice," he remarked casually to the bartender when the man set the drink before him.

"You said it, cowboy," the barkeep agreed enthusiastically. "Nice as she looks and sings, too. Don't nobody try to get fresh with her."

"Where'd she come from?"

"Right here in the basin. Jim Demming's girl. Jim owned a little outfit in the south part of the basin, up till he was killed a couple of years ago. Night riders raided his place, shot Jim down, burned his ranchhouse. Happened Rose was away from home that night. Ranch was mortgaged heavy and the bank had to take it over. Rose Demming was left alone, broke, homeless. Proud as all get out, she was, and still is. Took a job playin' the violin and singin' here in the Rainbow Bar."

"Nick Malone's in love with her, ain't he?" Morgan asked curiously.

"Reckon so. Most ever' puncher in the basin is." The fat man stared fishily at Morgan. "Best way I know to get a quick ticket to Boot Hill, hombre, would be to try some smart shenannigan with Rose Demming!"

The barkeep moved away. Morgan turned, placed his elbows on the bar, facing the batwings. On his right was a window which he knew opened into an alley. Now as his alert eyes caught a quick swirl of movement outside that open window he ducked, flinging himself away from the bar. He went to his knees.

He saw the cold gleam of lamplight on steel, felt the hot breath of the blade as it hissed past his throat, heard the dull, sickening sound it made as it plunged into the back of the drunken saddle bum.

That blade, Wayne Morgan knew, had been meant for his own heart!

CHAPTER VII

The Dark Killer

SAGGING against the bar, the drifter coughed, clawing convulsively at the rail with his fingers. Then, like a man going to sleep, he slid slowly down the bar to the floor and lay on his face. And at that moment Wayne Morgan probably was the only man in the room who knew what had happened, who saw the haft of the knife sticking rigidly from the dead man's back. Just for an instant, as the knife was thrown, Morgan had seen the face of the knifeman in the murky light—a dark, cruel face with a ragged scar writhing across one cheek.

He knew he couldn't help the man on the floor. He leaped to his feet, darted to the open window and leaped through into the alley, guns in hand. The alley between the two buildings was dark, quiet, seemingly empty. Somewhere, out behind the row of buildings, he heard the hard pound of running feet.

He ran to the back end of the alley, paused. Off to his left he heard a loud clatter, as if the running man had stumbled over a pile of empty cans. He blazed a shot in that direction.

Almost instantly, three swift, blasting shots roared back at him, the bullets slashing into the wall near him.

Instead of ducking back to safety, Morgan leaped forward, running hard straight toward the spot from which the shots had come. His guns roared again, and again, lacing the darkness with seeking fingers of lead.

No answering shots came. Morgan paused warily. Was he running into a trap, or had the knifeman been killed? He stood motionless, straining ears and eyes. He could hear a confused murmur of voices from the Rainbow Bar, from the front street. But the shadows about him were utterly silent.

Throwing caution aside, he ran forward again. He stumbled over the tin cans, and the racket seemed thunderous. He flattened himself against the earth. Now, if the killer were crouched nearby, he would strike.

But nothing at all happened.

Then Morgan knew that the knifeman had escaped. He might have gone in any direction, even through a second alley and mingled with the excited crowd on the street. After searching the vicinity thoroughly, Morgan returned to the Rainbow Bar.

The room now was packed with curious, excited men. Sheriff Ben Paris, obviously just arrived, was stooping over the dead man. He straightened, holding in his hand the knife that had killed the saddle drifter.

It was, Morgan saw, a peculiar-looking knife. The long, heavy blade, tapering to a needle-sharp point, was wavy.

The sheriff stared about belligerently.

"Somebody's lyin'!" he rapped. "Hombre couldn't get knifed in a room with thirty other people in it and nobody see it happen."

"First thing I knowed," declared a puncher who had been standing beside the drifter, "he just kind of sagged down. Figgered for a minute he'd had too much red-eye."

Others corroborated his story.

"What became of that other gent—this Wayne Morgan—that was standin' beside him?" somebody asked.

"That's right, by gosh! I saw him jump through the window, just after it happened like the devil was on his coat-tails!"

"Then likely he done it," the sheriff said grimly. "Seems to have a likin' for trouble. Spread out, men, and we'll find him!"

"Lookin' for me, gents?" Morgan drawled, stepping forward.

"I shore am!" Paris drew his gun and jabbed it at Morgan. "Hombre, I'm arrestin' yuh for the murder of this feller here.

"Morgan didn't do it!" It was the fat bartender speaking. "I was lookin' straight at him when it happened. I don't know who done it, but I know he didn't!"

The bartender's word was not disputed. There was another excited hubbub of voices.

"Then who did do it?" the sheriff demanded. "A gent wouldn't stab his own self in the back. He couldn't!"

"The knife came through the window," Morgan explained calmly. "It was meant for me. When I ducked, I didn't know of course that it would hit this man."

"Yuh see who throwed it?"

Morgan hesitated. "No. Only a shadow."

"Why would somebody want to kill you?" the sheriff barked.

"I don't know." The tall cowboy shrugged. "Seems to me a lot of queer things are happenin' on this range. That's a queer-lookin' knife, Sheriff."

Sheriff Paris stared at the murder weapon.

"It is, for a fact. Never saw one like it before. Any of you jasters know somebody ownin' a blade like this?"

NOBODY did. There were more questions and conjecture. Doc Banner, who was also the coroner, arrived and gave his verdict, and the body of the unfortunate drifter was taken away.

Shortly after, Morgan left the Rainbow Bar. He made the rounds of the saloons, making a casual but thorough search. Apparently, neither Whip Shann nor Nick Malone was in town.

Morgan went to the hotel where he had a room. The clerk was a garrulous oldster. Morgan paused at the desk, deliberately encouraging him to talk.

"Now let me see." The oldster scratched his chin, reacting to Morgan's shrewd questioning. "A dark, hatchet-faced gent with a mustache and a scar across the left cheek, yuh say? Ain't but one jasper like that in the basin, far as I know. It'd be Russ Tolbert. Runs a little shirt-tail outfit, along with his brother Rufe, over at the head of Thunder Gorge. Tough ones, they are. Yuh a friend of the Tolberts?"

Morgan shook his head, went up the stairs to his room.

Lying down almost fully dressed, it was some time before he fell asleep. He knew the name of the man who had tried to kill him. But who had hired Russ Tolbert? Whip Shann, because Morgan had humiliated him before the town? Nick Malone? Or somebody else, merely because he had rescued Blackjack Malone the day before?

The questions were still seething in Morgan's mind when he went to sleep. . . .

He awoke suddenly, aware of an excited babble of voices in the street below. He got up, moved to the open window. A small group of men was gathered in the light from a saloon door across the street from the hotel.

From the confused babble several words came with stark clarity to him:

"Blackjack Malone—" And—"The Masked Rider!"

Morgan jerked on his boots, strapped on his guns, ran down the stairs and joined the group in front of the saloon.

At the center of the group was Banker Harvey Boyd. Boyd's clothes were disheveled and blood was trickling over one side of his face. A cold feeling touched Morgan, even before he heard the banker's excited, almost incoherent words.

"Kidnaped right out of my house, I tell you! Malone was sleeping across the hall from me. Something awakened me. I lay listening, and then I heard a peculiar noise in Malone's room. I heard voices. Knowing Malone was supposed to be alone, I put on a robe and started to investigate. When I opened the door to Malone's room, this Masked Rider was shoving Malone through the open window."

"Yuh shore it was the Masked Rider?" Morgan asked sharply.

Boyd looked at him blankly.

"Of course I'm sure. He wore a mask and cape, was dressed all in black. And the Masked Rider's known to be in the basin, isn't he?"

"Then what happened?" demanded Morgan.

"Why, I—I was rattled, I guess. I didn't have a gun. And when I ran forward and tried to grapple with the Masked Rider, he struck me over the head with his gun. I must have been unconscious for several minutes, for when I came to there was no sign of either Blackjack Malone or the Masked Rider. Then I came to town to get help.

"It's an outrage! The home of a peaceable, law-abiding citizen invaded, his best friend kidnaped and doomed to heaven only knows what horrible fate! This Masked Rider should be caught and lynched!"

Sheriff Paris arrived on the scene, half-dressed, and the story had to be told all over again. Morgan withdrew to the edge of the crowd. Self-censure, for not maintaining a closer guard over the old rancher was bitter inside him.

The story was plain. Blackjack Malone's enemy—or enemies—were behind the kidnaping. Probably this time they would make certain that the rancher died. Dressing the kidnaper in an imitation of the Masked Rider's garb was simply a clever trick to throw blame for the crime on the famous Robin Hood Rider, a trick that had worked many times before.

Morgan accompanied Sheriff Paris and Boyd to the banker's bungalow on the edge of town, for an investigation. They found little to help them.

There were footprints under the window of Malone's room, leading to a nearby clump of cedars where two horses had been tethered. Hoofprints of the horses merged with many others in the road. Trailing them would be impossible. On the floor of Malone's room were splotches of blood.

BOYD'S aged housekeeper corroborated the banker's story. Awakened by the racket, she had arrived just in time to see the black-garbed kidnaper vanish through the window with his victim.

Despite his bitterness and impatience, Wayne Morgan knew there was nothing he could do tonight to help Blackjack Malone. Probably he was miles away by now. Blackjack might even be beyond earthly help. If that were so, then swift and merciless retribution awaited his murderers, Wayne Morgan vowed grimly.

Morgan reached the camp on Weeping Woman Creek at dawn the next morning, when a gray mist was rising shroudlike from the water. He gave the throaty cry of a mountain lion, and was answered almost instantly by Blue Hawk.

Blue Hawk had a pot of coffee boiling on the fire. Anxiety showed plainly on his usually impassive features.

"I have been worried, Senor," he said. "You were gone a long time."

"Couldn't be helped, Hawk. A lot has happened since I saw yuh. And the news is bad."

"Coffee, Senor, while I take care of the roan," said the Yaqui.

When Blue Hawk returned he listened attentively as Morgan briefly related the events of the last several hours.

"You have no clue as to who these evil ones might be, those who wish the Senor Blackjack killed—who might, indeed, have already killed him?" Blue Hawk asked.

"Nothin' I can be short of yet. But I've had my eyes and ears open, yuh can be certain."

The Yaqui didn't ask what these clues might be. He knew they would be divulged at the proper time. "What will we do next, Senor?" was what the Yaqui did ask.

"We'll go on the theory that Blackjack is still alive, and search for him. It's certain that this Russ Tolbert, who tried to kill me last night, is mixed up in it—might even be the feller who was dressed as the Masked Rider and kidnaped Blackjack Malone. I'll make a little visit to his place at Thunder Gorge."

"As Wayne Morgan—or the Masked Rider?"

"The Masked Rider. That might loosen his tongue quicker."

After eating, Morgan donned the domino mask, black cloak and sombrero that transformed him into the dashing Masked Rider. Then he mounted the black stallion Midnight, while Blue Hawk forked the wiry gray, and they rode deeper into the hills. The hotel clerk had given Wayne Morgan explicit directions as to how to reach the Tolberts' cabin.

They came to a narrow but swiftly-flowing stream that roared down from the hills and followed its winding course for perhaps three miles. The country became increasingly rough, slashed by canyons and timbered slopes. In spots the creek was relatively placid, in others it plunged with a rough, thunderous voice between jagged walls.

As the clerk had said, the Tolberts' ranch shack lay at the head of one of these canyons through which the creek plunged, one named, appropriately enough, Thunder Gorge. Inside the gorge the water raced and foamed over shark's-teeth rocks, plummeted through murderous-looking rapids, hammered and slashed against the dripping black walls.

The cabin itself was in a narrow meadow a hundred yards above the canyon mouth. Along with the pole corrals and rickety outbuildings, it had a dilapidated, rundown appearance. If the Tolberts were shiftless and no-account, so was their outfit.

As the two riders watched from the edge of the clearing, a man came from the cabin carrying a pail that had a length of frayed rope attached to its handle. The Masked Rider knew at a glance, from the ragged scar on the left side of the man's dark face, that this was Russ Tolbert. It was, beyond

[*Turn to page 34*]

Hal Sacrificed His Chance To Win, But Then...
HAL FOSS, EX-FIGHTER PILOT, HAS A FULL LAP LEAD IN THE FIRST POSTWAR RUNNING OF THE FAMOUS 500-MILE METROPOLIS HANDICAP
FOSS IS A CINCH IF NOTHING HAPPENS!
5
OOOHHHH!
IT'S HIM OR THE FENCE!
MISTER, YOU'RE JUST PLAIN LUCKY!
YES, BUT THERE GOES THE RACE FOR ME
TOUGH BREAK FOR BOTH OF US, BOB
SIS, MEET HAL FOSS. HE LOST THE RACE, RISKING HIS LIFE TO SAVE MINE
AFTER THE RACE
CONGRATULATIONS, TOM. I COULDN'T LOSE TO A BETTER MAN
I'M THROUGH WITH MY RAZOR, HAL. YOU'RE NEXT
SAY, MY WHISKERS CAME OFF LIKE MAGIC. THAT BLADE'S PLENTY KEEN!
I ALWAYS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY MAKE SHAVING A CINCH
I NEED A PARTNER AND DAD WILL PUT UP THE CAPITAL
A TURBO-JET AUTO ENGINE? WOW! COUNT ME IN!
M-M-M, NOW I'LL SEE HIM OFTEN
YOU GET SLICK-LOOKING, REFRESHING SHAVES EVERY TIME WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICED FIELD. ALSO, THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY AND SAFEGUARD YOU FROM THE DISCOMFORT AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢

a doubt, the face of the man who had flung the peculiar knife through the saloon window the night before.

There was no sign of Rufe, the other Tolbert brother.

CHAPTER VIII

Death in Icy Depths

RUSS TOLBERT, thick-shouldered, powerful-looking, went at a shambling walk toward the nearby creek, carrying the pail. He went out onto a fallen pine log that spanned the creek here, lowered the pail by the rope, drew the vessel up brimming with the clear water. Then he recrossed the clearing and poured the water through the poles into a corral that held several scrawny cows.

The Masked Rider motioned to Blue Hawk for them both to withdraw a short distance into the timber. There the black-clad man dismounted.

"Wait here, Hawk," he instructed. "I want to take this hombre alive if I can. I think he can tell us what we want to know. If we can loosen his tongue, mebbe it'll clear up the whole mess. Don't show yoreself unless yuh hear shots."

"Yes, Senor, I understand."

Silent as a huge black cat, the Masked Rider returned afoot to the edge of the clearing. Tolbert was making another trip to the creek with the pail. The Masked man had anticipated this, and as Tolbert walked carefully out onto the log, the Robin Hood rider was crouched behind a clump of jackpines less than forty feet away.

As Tolbert lowered the pail, the masked man ran forward, gun in hand.

Tolbert drew up the pail, turned, started back across the log. Then he stopped suddenly, eyes flaring wide as he saw the grim, black-garbed figure standing there.

"Surprised, Tolbert?" the masked man asked coldly. "Yuh shouldn't be. Any gent mixed-up in such skunky business as you are ought to expect a visit from the Masked Rider, sooner or later!"

"You—I don't know what yuh're talkin' about!" Tolbert stammered. "I ain't mixed in nothin' dishonest."

"Lyin' won't help!" the masked man said coldly. "Listen to me, Tolbert. If yuh've heard of the Masked Rider, yuh've heard he don't bluff. I know yuh threw a knife through a window of the Rainbow Bar saloon last night and tried to kill a puncher named Wayne Morgan. Instead, yuh killed a drunk saddle bum. I also know yuh're workin' for the fiend that's tryin' to ruin and kill Blackjack Malone."

"That's a lie!" Tolbert said harshly. His evil face had blanched, and fear was plain in his black eyes. "I don't know anything about Blackjack Malone."

"Yuh've got just one chance to live a while longer, Tolbert." The Masked Rider's voice was harsh, implacable. "Tell me who it is that wants Malone killed, and why. Yuh couldn't be closer to perdition if yuh was standin' on a gallows with a rope about yore filthy neck. Yuh better talk—quick!"

"Wait!" Tolbert choked. "I—I ain't lyin', Masked Rider. Shore, I tried to kill Wayne Morgan last night, but—"

"Who paid yuh to do it?"

There was a wild, hunted look in Tolbert's eyes. His dark features were a changing pattern of terror and bitter hope for survival. He still stood several feet from the bank, the dripping pail in his hand. If he wore a gun it was not in sight.

The gunhammer clicked back. It had a doomlike sound.

"Yore last chance, Tolbert. Talk—or die!"

With an incredibly quick motion, Tolbert flung the pail at the masked man, turned and started leaping catlike back along the log. The Masked Rider flung himself aside and the hurtling pail missed him. He raised his gun.

In Tolbert's frantic haste, his foot slipped on the peeled log. He fell headlong, clawing frantically at the log, but lost his hold and plummeted downward into the swirling blue water twenty feet below.

The Masked Rider leaped to the rim overlooking the stream. He saw Tolbert's head cleave the water's surface directly below him. The burly man looked upward, desperation in his eyes. Then he dived.

The Masked Rider could have killed him then. But he was convinced that Tolbert held the key to the mystery he was trying to solve. He wanted the scar-faced killer alive, if possible.

Swiftly he unstrapped his gun-belts and let them fall to the ground. They were followed by his sombrero and the black cloak. Then, like a dark arrow cleaving the air, the

masked man dived into the stream after his prey.

Here the water was deep and cold, and the Masked Rider felt himself plunging downward into the chill darkness toward the creek bottom. He twisted his powerful body, striking out with feet and hands.

WHEN his head cleft the surface he saw Tolbert less than ten feet away. Tolbert was treading water, dripping water splayed about his snarling dark face. Rage and desperation were in his eyes, and he knew now that the only way to escape the Masked Rider was to kill him.

Savagely he launched himself at the masked man.

Churning the water like an alligator, the Masked Rider dived. He felt the cold swirl of the water as Tolbert passed over him. Reaching up, he fastened both hands about one of the killer's feet. Kicking and threshing furiously, Tolbert was jerked underneath the water.

The Masked Rider dragged him down almost to the creek bottom, then released him and himself fought to the surface.

Two seconds later, Tolbert's dripping head broke water a few feet away. The masked man lunged at him, smashing his fist savagely into the scarred face. Tolbert cursed, tried to back away. But the Masked Rider followed him relentlessly, treading water, blasting at that rocklike face.

"What I said still goes, Tolbert," the Masked Rider said flatly. "Say yuh'll talk and I'll let yuh out of here. Otherwise, yuh'll die here in this water!"

"I'd rather die like this than the way I'd die if I talked," Tolbert said harshly. "And I ain't dead yet. Without them guns, Masked Rider, yuh're cold meat. Yuh've overmatched yoreself this time!"

The Masked Rider's answer was a forward dive. Tolbert's head abruptly sank under the water. The masked man, sensing Tolbert's ruse, tried to back away, but he was too late.

Steel-like arms encircled his ankles and dragged him under the water. He was, the Masked Rider realized, in the same predicament Tolbert had been in a moment before. He struck out fiercely, kicking, lunging, twisting, using all his cunning and magnificent strength in an effort to break that deathhold.

But Tolbert's strength almost matched his own. Relentlessly, the desperate killer dragged him down toward the creek bottom. Down and down, until he could smell and taste the mud on the bottom, and his lungs seemed about to burst.

Finally, somehow, he freed one leg. And with that free foot he kicked and pounded at Tolbert's shaggy head. The clutching hands slackened, broke away.

The seconds that elapsed before the Masked Rider regained the surface seemed interminable. He gulped in great mouthfuls of cool, sweet air, looking about for Tolbert.

When the killer's head broke water five feet away, the Masked Rider launched himself instantly, clamping both arms about Tolbert's thick neck and dragging him back under the water before he had time to fill his lungs with air.

Tolbert fought with incredible savagery to break that hold. He mauled and kicked, lunged and twisted, clawing at the Masked Rider's face and body with talonlike fingers. But the Robin Hood rider held on grimly. He wanted to convince the scar-faced man beyond doubt that unless he talked he would die.

Churning and lashing the water like two monsters of the deep, they sank down into the chill green depths. The masked man felt the mud of the creek bottom under him again. He jerked Tolbert over under him, jammed the man's face down into the sticky stuff.

The killer's struggles were growing weaker. This time, the Masked Rider figured, when Tolbert regained the surface he would be willing to talk.

His own lungs burning, he released the killer and fought to the surface. Air had never tasted sweeter. His mind was reeling.

He treaded water, waiting for Tolbert to surface. Seconds passed. Still there was no sign of the scar-faced killer. When a full minute had passed, and Tolbert had not appeared, the Masked Rider knew that he had gambled—and lost.

He had held the killer under too long. Tolbert was dead.

He felt no pity for the killer. Tolbert had met a just fate. But with Tolbert went another chance to break the case he was working on.

"Senor!" Blue Hawk's urgent shout came to him. "Danger—above you!"

The Masked Rider looked upward. On the embankment above him stood a man who was, except for the ragged scar, a counter-

part of Russ Tolbert. Rufe Tolbert had a gun in his hand, was glaring along its polished barrel at the man in the water.

DESPERATELY the Masked Rider dived. But even as he went under, he heard the crash of a rifle, saw Rufe Tolbert stiffen, whirl, and tumble backwards off the embankment. Quickly the masked man resurfaced.

Rufe Tolbert was just vanishing beneath the water.

The Masked Rider swam to the creek's edge and clambered up the embankment. By now Blue Hawk had raced across the clearing.

"Are you safe, Senor?" he shouted anxiously.

"Except for a wettin', Hawk." The Masked Rider strapped on his guns. "But I didn't make Russ Tolbert talk. He's dead, and so is his brother, I reckon."

"I am sorry I had to kill this other one, Senor," said the Yaqui. "I heard him ride up, and I followed, knowing you would be in danger."

"Good thing for me yuh did. Seems like yuh're always in the right place at the right time, Hawk."

The Yaqui's black eyes glowed at the compliment.

"What now, Senor?" he asked.

"Nothin' to be gained by stayin' here. Through Wayne Morgan I'll let the sheriff know the Tolberts got killed by the Masked Rider, and where their bodies can be found. My clothes'll dry out while we ride back to camp."

They returned to the hideout beside Weeping Woman Creek, where the Masked Rider again became Wayne Morgan. After eating a meal prepared by Blue Hawk, they mounted their horses and rode toward the nearby hills. Morgan was determined to find Blackjack Malone, dead or alive.

If the oldster was still alive, Morgan knew, he was probably being held by the raiders who hung out in the rougher country. And somewhere in the roughs the renegades—the ordinary cutthroats who carried out the orders of the "boss"—likely had their hideout.

It was not altogether accidental when, an hour later, Morgan and Blue Hawk found themselves in the vicinity of the abandoned mine on Blackjack Malone's property. The main shaft of the old mine was at the foot of a red sandstone hill. The vicinity was overgrown with weeds, the mine sheds and buildings dilapidated and overrun by rats.

The shaft entrance, as Malone had said, had been boarded up. But now most of the rotting planks had been torn away. Much of the mine machinery remained, rusted and in bad disrepair. The old-fashioned "bucket," used for entering and leaving the deep shaft, was operated from a hoist shed near the entrance. The hoist—either as it had been left years before or had been repaired recently—apparently was still workable.

Neither Morgan nor Blue Hawk, however, entered the mine. Morgan was not too surprised at finding signs of recent activity about the mine. The Lily Belle obviously still drew curious visitors.

Or—the suspicion had already entered Morgan's mind—were the raiders of Sapphire Valley using the deserted old mine as a hideout?

CHAPTER IX

Murder!

DECIDING to return at a later date for a more thorough investigation of the mine, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk left the vicinity and rode deeper into the hills. Morgan's eyes, as well as his keen mind, were alert. Through no fault of his own, he had failed Blackjack Malone. For he was sure, in his own mind that the old rancher either was in deadly danger, or was already dead.

Although a certain conviction was slowly crystallizing in Morgan's mind, he still did not know the identity of the man who was trying to ruin and kill the old rancher. Was it Whip Shann, a brutal, dangerous man, driven by his hatred for Malone? Or Malone's own son, Nick? Nick Malone, obviously, held deep resentment against his father. He was quick-tempered, unsociable. But did either of these have the money to pay a big bunch of hard-cases to do their dirty work?

"A cabin, Senor," Blue Hawk said suddenly.

They had halted at the edge of a clearing beside the creek.

Morgan nodded. "Clayton Robards' cabin, Hawk. The queer jasper who patched Blackjack Malone up two days ago, remember?"

"Yes, Senor. The hombre who sings and makes music and who has many books and beautiful pictures in his cabin. The hombre who shuts himself away from the world and its troubles and wickedness, and does not wish to be disturbed. Is it not so?"

"Yeah." Morgan grinned. "I kind of cottoned to the cuss, though, and he had a lot of interestin' things layin' about. Yuh think he'd mind if I dropped by for just a few minutes?"

The Yaqui shrugged, coppery face impassive, though he knew that this visit, like the one to the old mine, was not accidental.

"Mebbe yuh'd better fade back into the timber and wait," Morgan suggested. "I reckon one visitor wouldn't be as bad as two. Wait there for me."

Blue Hawk nodded, turned the pinto and vanished into the dense timber that hemmed the clearing. Morgan rode slowly forward and stopped before the cabin. He saw no sign of Robards as he dismounted, tied the roan at the hitch-bar, went to the closed door and tapped on it lightly.

There was no sound from inside. After knocking again, and receiving no answer, he tried the door. It was unlocked and swung inward. After a moment's hesitation, Morgan stepped into the room.

The room was exactly as he remembered it, except that Robards was not there. But obviously the bespectacled hermit had been here not many moments before. On an ash-tray was the butt of one of the imported cigars. Its sweetish aroma was plainly evident in the room. Morgan touched the ashes, found them still warm.

Clayton Robards, then, was probably nearby and would return soon. Wayne Morgan had found himself oddly attracted by the eccentric, well-educated Robards. To renounce the world, to have no yearning for the society of other men, to have utter contempt for power or glory or riches—these things were unusual.

Morgan walked about the room, looking at the queer objects it contained, at the beautiful pictures, the books. Some of the books were classics, others carried titles he had never heard of. Many were on Oriental subjects. Obviously Robards had traveled widely, was deeply interested in the Orient.

Morgan opened the door to one of the other rooms. It was a smaller counterpart of this one, except that it contained no piano, no books. Vividly-colored rugs covered the floor. A drawer to a gleaming chest of drawers stood half-open. Glancing inside, Morgan saw that the drawer contained only what appeared to be dirt-covered pieces of odd-shaped rocks and pebbles.

The third room was a bedroom, more simply furnished.

Morgan returned to the front room, feeling a twinge of conscience at his prowling. He was debating whether or not to wait for Robards when he heard a light footstep, and turned to see Clayton Robards in the doorway.

Quick surprise touched Morgan. Behind his thick spectacles Robards' eyes were blazing. His gaunt body was rigid, his pale features contorted by rage.

"What are you doing in my cabin?" he lashed out. "Who are you?"

"Wayne Morgan." Morgan was inwardly amazed at the man's passionate anger. "If yuh remember, I was here two nights ago with old Blackjack Malone."

"Yes, I remember. I also remember your rude curiosity. I presume you came back to ogle and stare some more at objects and treasures your simple mind could not appreciate!"

"I dropped by for a visit, that's all," Morgan said stiffly. "Figured yuh'd be back shortly, so just made myself at home. If yuh don't know it, Robards, in the West an unlocked door is an invitation to do just that. Looks like I've put my foot in it up to the hock, though, so I'll be ridin'."

"No, wait!"

GRADUALLY Robards' anger left him. He removed his glasses and rubbed a hand across his eyes. When he spoke again his voice was mild, courteous.

"I'm sorry, Morgan. As you no doubt have surmised, I am rather new to the West. For one who has traveled over much of the earth and seen its greed and battle for riches, it is hard to realize the deep generosity and trust of this new land. Seeing you in my home, uninvited, for the moment I forgot where I was. Again, I'm sorry."

Morgan grinned good-naturedly. The hermit seemed wholly sincere in his apology, his explanation logical.

"I done forgot about it," Morgan said. "One reason I stopped by I reckoned yuh might be interested in knowin' Blackjack Malone has disappeared. Or mebbe yuh already know it?"

"No, I didn't know it!" Concern showed on Robards' face. "I have few visitors here. When, and how, did it happen?"

Briefly, Morgan detailed the events leading up to the kidnaping of the old rancher.

"The Masked Rider!" Robards murmured. "Truly a figure to capture the imagination. But what would be his object in abducting Malone?"

"I don't think he did," Morgan said bluntly. "I think it was one of Malone's enemies dressed up like the Masked Rider. As to who, or why they want him killed, I aim to find out!"

"For one who is a comparative stranger, you seem deeply interested in Blackjack Malone's welfare," commented Robards.

"I took a ridin' job with him," Morgan said quickly, "and I stand by my boss. Besides, I don't like to stand by and see a wolf pack pick a starved old bull to pieces."

"Precisely! I admire you, Morgan. Many times I would have given all I owned to have a man of your caliber beside me. I also have taken a liking for Blackjack Malone. I don't suppose there's anything I can do, but if there should be, let me know."

"I'll shore look yuh up," Morgan said heartily.

He chatted with Robards for perhaps fifteen minutes. Himself well-versed on many subjects, he found Robards amazingly well-informed and a fluent talker who explained the origin and uses of a number of the objects in the room. Many of them had originated in mysterious and little-known Tibet.

Taking his leave, Morgan rejoined Blue Hawk and they slanted back down through the foothills. The Yaqui showed no curiosity as to what had happened. He knew that Wayne Morgan never did a thing without reason.

Twenty minutes later, drawn by buzzards circling low in the air, they found the body of a man lying at the edge of Weeping Woman Creek. The body, half-submerged, had lodged on a drift. It was horribly mangled and battered from head to feet.

The face, as such, was wholly unrecognizable. Obviously the man had been dead several hours, perhaps since the night before.

The tattered clothes looked familiar to Wayne Morgan. Rummaging through the dead man's pockets, his suspicion became certainty. Among other things he took from a pocket was a tally-book with the name still legible despite its soaked condition.

"Our search for Blackjack Malone ends right here, Hawk," Morgan said grimly. "The sidewinders murdered him!"

It was almost sundown when Wayne Morgan reached Silver Bow with the dead man. He had borrowed a buckboard for the task from a rancher named John Duke. Blue Hawk had returned to the camp, electing, as always, to stay as much as possible in the background.

Quick curiosity gripped the town as Wayne Morgan drove along the street with the blanket-covered figure and stopped before Doc Banner's office, which was also a funeral parlor. Sheriff Ben Paris was the first man to reach the scene.

"What's busted loose now?" he demanded. "Who yuh got there, Morgan?"

"Blackjack Malone, I reckon," Morgan said somberly.

"Yuh reckon?" barked the sheriff. "Don't yuh know?"

For answer, Morgan jumped to the ground, lifted a corner of the blanket so the sheriff could peer underneath. The lawman grunted, swore in a shocked, enraged voice.

"Where'd yuh find him—and what makes yuh think it's old Blackjack?" he asked hastily.

"Found him in Weepin' Woman Creek. These are Blackjack's clothes, his boots—I remember that crescent-shaped patch on the toe—and Blackjack's tally-book was in a pocket."

"So they got 'im, after all. Couple you galoots grab hold here and carry the body inside."

A SMALL crowd had gathered, and now two punchers lifted the blanket-wrapped figure from the buckboard and carried it into the undertaking parlor. Doc Banner, a bald, paunchy oldster, made an examination. So far as he could find, he reported, Blackjack Malone had not been shot or stabbed. His face and body were terribly battered and slashed, which might have been caused by a brutal beating, or a fall over a cliff.

"Reckon ain't much doubt how he died," growled the sheriff. "I've heard of the Masked Rider's snaky tricks. Heard he likes to torture before he kills."

"Then yuh heard a bunch of rotten lies!" exploded Morgan.

Only Morgan, the sheriff, and Doc Banner remained in the room. The sheriff looked

sharply at Morgan, surprised by the vehemence of the tall cowboy's words.

"Yuh seem to know a lot about this Masked Rider, Morgan," he grunted. "Just how much do yuh know about him?"

"Mighty little." Morgan saw that he had spoken too quickly. "I just don't like to see a gent painted black without proof."

"Just the same, I aim to—"

What the blond sheriff aimed to do would never be known, for suddenly the door was flung violently open and Nick Malone strode into the room. Nick's dark face was taut, his reckless eyes filled with bitter anger.

"They said my father was here," he said harshly. "They said he'd been killed!"

His gaze stopped on the still figure, and he quit speaking, abruptly. Wayne Morgan, watching him closely, knew that here was either a man consumed by deep grief and rage, or an expert actor. Nick walked forward, stiff-legged, like a man held in the clutches of a horrible nightmare, and stopped beside the couch that held his father. He stood there a long moment, tense, his hands clenched, his face a stern, cold mask. The room was deathly quiet.

"Who did it?" Nick asked harshly, without turning. "Tell me, and the devil'll have to clean out a spare room, pronto!"

"We don't know, Nick," the sheriff said, not ungently. "Morgan here claims he found the body in Weepin' Woman Creek. Sounds reasonable. His clothes are still wet, and he's been dead since mebbe last night. That right, Doc?"

Doc Banner nodded, busy with the corpse.

"Somebody'll pay for this!" Nick turned and looked flatly at Wayne Morgan. "Morgan, I've been suspicious of you from the first. Yuh're too nosy. And for the last two-three days yuh've managed to be right on the spot when somethin' happened."

"I rode for Blackjack Malone," the tall cowboy said slowly. "All I wanted was to protect him. Through no fault of my own, I failed. I don't know who killed him—or had it done—but I've got an idea we'll all know before long."

"Hombre," the sheriff snapped, "if yuh know somethin' yuh ain't told, yuh'd better start talkin'!"

Morgan shook his head.

"The Masked Rider's workin' on the case. And when he takes a trail, I've heard, he don't stop till he reaches its end."

"The Masked Rider! I still think he's behind all this!"

"And I think yuh're wrong! I've got a hunch he'll get to the bottom of this business, and when he does we'll all know about it."

"I ain't dependin' on the Masked Rider or anybody else!" Nick Malone snapped. "I can take care of my own!"

He whirled, stalked from the undertaking parlor.

"Seems right cut-up about it," Sheriff Paris muttered. "Reckon blood's thicker'n water, after all."

"And mebbe things ain't always what they seem," murmured Wayne Morgan.

"Meanin' what, hombre?"

Morgan shrugged enigmatically, remained silent. But in a little while he did speak.

"Sheriff," he said then, "if I can't be any more help, reckon I'll be ridin'."

"Reckon it'll be all right," the sheriff agreed, after a moment's hesitation. "But don't leave the basin. I'll want yuh as a witness later."

"I'll stay around," Morgan promised, and left the room.

A few moments later he mounted the roan,

[*Turn page*]

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which had been tied behind the buckboard, and rode into the deepening dusk.

CHAPTER X

Two Can Play

NOT long after sunup the next morning young Nick Malone mounted his rangy dun and rode northeastward from his homestead. An ivory-butted .45 was tied low on his thigh. His face was grim, his black eyes cold and determined.

He rode steadily, staring straight ahead, like a man with a fixed purpose in his mind. And, after an hour's ride, he approached Whip Shann's Anchor Ranch.

Shann's ranch buildings huddled beside a small stream, in dark shadows cast by towering pines. The ranchhouse was constructed of strong logs, with a log and sod roof, giving it a fortlike appearance. The sheds and corrals, while crudely built, looked strong and serviceable.

Nick rode up and stopped before the ranchhouse without stealth or hesitation. A couple of hard-faced riders before the squat bunkhouse regarded him with sleepy, unfriendly eyes.

"Where's Shann?" Nick asked bluntly.

"Whip!" one of the punchers bawled. "Gent to see yuh!"

Heavy footsteps sounded inside the ranchhouse, and the powerful figure of Whip Shann appeared in the doorway, its bulk almost filling the opening. He was buckling a gun-belt about his thick waist. He paused abruptly as he saw Nick Malone, scowling darkly, his yellowish eyes narrowing.

Shann stepped to the ground, walked forward stiff-legged, like a belligerent bulldog. Nick had dismounted and stood beside his horse. Other hard-eyed riders had come from the bunkhouse and now came forward, watching curiously.

Shann's tone was unfriendly, gruff.

"What yuh want here, Malone?"

"To see you, Shann!"

"Yuh're lookin' at me. Somethin' stickin' in yore craw, rooster?"

"Yuh might say that. Shann, I reckon yuh know my father, Blackjack Malone, was found over in Weeping Woman Creek yesterday. Dead, murdered by some slimy snake!"

"I heard the old wolf had got his needin's," Shann said brutally. "Yuh expect me to break down and cry about it?"

"I expect to find out who done it," Nick ripped out. "And when I do, I expect to kill the murderin', cow-killin' skunk!"

Tension was suddenly like a bad odor in the little group. Whip Shann's thick, hair-covered fingers clenched and unclenched. His powerful shoulders were rounded. Anger and hate made a pattern of recklessness on Nick's dark face. To an impartial observer it would have been plain that his fierce emotions had driven him into a perilous predicament where the odds were ten to one.

Shann flicked a glance at his riders.

"Yuh accusin' me of murder, rooster?" he purred.

"If the boot fits, wear it! I don't know for shore yuh done it, or I wouldn't be standin' here talkin'. I rode over to warn yuh, Shann, that from here on I'm cuttin' yore sign. Stay off Broken Bell land. Make a crooked step and I'll kill yuh like I would a mad wolf!"

Shann leaped forward with amazing swiftness, swinging his massive fist.

Nick snatched at his gun. But fast as he was, Shann's mauling fist smashed into his face while the gun was still in leather. The savage blow drove Nick to the ground.

Nick rolled over, half-stunned, still trying to draw his gun. Shann's heavy boot lashed out, struck the gun, hurled it twenty feet away. One of the punchers picked it up. Shann's boot lashed out again, wickedly. Nick shuddered, writhed about on the ground, dazed but not unconscious.

Shann turned deliberately, his face a wolfish mask, and stepped to the cabin wall. From nails driven into the logs dangled three murderous-looking bullwhips. Obviously Shann believed in having spares handy. He seized one of the whips, whirled, his hand flashing back.

Nick Malone was rising to his knees, his eyes glassy and uncomprehending. The tip of the uncoiling lash cut at his shoulders, ripping his shirt as if a knife blade had torn it. Nick groaned with pain, tried to get to his feet. The lash hissed again, and this time it slashed wickedly at Nick's throat, bringing blood.

"I'll show yuh!" Shann snarled. "I hated the old wolf, and I hate you! I'll cut yuh to ribbons!"

"That's enough, Shann!" a cold voice ordered. "What you need is a good dose of yore own medicine!"

WHIP SHANN, his arm drawn back for another murderous blow, stiffened and whirled instead. A sharp exclamation came from his riders.

A black-garbed masked man had stepped around a corner of the ranchhouse. Twin black guns were in his hands. Behind the domino mask his eyes were cold and merciless.

"The Masked Rider!" Shann said hoarsely. "What do you want here?"

"Justice!" the masked man said flatly. "And cuttin' an unarmed man to pieces with a bullwhip ain't my idea of fair play."

Nick Malone had struggled to his feet. Blood was running over his face. Comprehension came gradually to his eyes as he stared at the Masked Rider.

"I followed yuh here, Malone," the Masked Rider said, not taking his alert eyes off Shann and his riders. "I'll admit I was suspicious as to what yuh was up to. I crept up behind the house in time to hear what yuh said. That seems to put yuh on the right side—for right now, at least."

Shann had recovered from some of his surprise.

"Yuh can't get away with this," he sneered. "Yuh won't leave here alive!"

"That's just yore opinion, Shann," said the masked man. "Unbuckle yore gun-belt and drop it to the ground, slow and careful. That goes for the rest of you rannihans. Quick—I'm not standin' any foolishness!"

Shann hesitated, then sullenly obeyed, as did the men of his outfit. They were not cowards, but they had heard much of the merciless qualities of that grim, black-clad rider, and his deadly accuracy with a gun.

"Gather the hardware up, Malone," the masked man ordered. "Keep yore own gun—unleathered."

Nick Malone speedily complied.

"And now, hombres," said the Masked Rider, almost gently, "so yuh won't go off half-cocked, these guns yuh see ain't the only ones lined on yore briskets. That right, Hawk?"

From a nearby shed came a calm voice.

"Yes, Senor. My gun is ready."

Heads swiveled toward the shed. There, jutting through a crack between two planks, was the sinister muzzle of a rifle.

"Yuh're right good with that plaything in yore hand, ain't yuh, Shann?" the Masked Rider said.

Shann's powerful hand still gripped the stock of the bullwhip. A crafty light seeped into his cougar eyes.

"Just fair, I reckon," he growled. "Why, Masked Rider?"

The Masked Rider took two backward steps, holstered his guns, took one of the other whips from the cabin wall.

"Since yuh're so fond of usin' a bullwhip on defenseless men," he snapped, "I'm givin' yuh a chance to prove just how good yuh are!"

Whip Shann stood braced on columnar legs, that cunning light deepening in his eyes. Like gladiators in a natural arena that was hemmed by forests and frowning hills, the two faced each other, warily, appraisingly.

The Anchor riders stood tense, expectant, confident that Whip Shann would cut that tall, black-clad man to pieces. Nick Malone covered the group with his six-shooter, while the muzzle of the rifle in the hands of the unseen Blue Hawk was steady and deadly.

Shann leaped suddenly, without warning, aiming his deadly lash at the Masked Rider's eyes. The masked man twisted aside with amazing speed, and his own hissing lash brought blood from the rancher's cheek. Then he leaped in, the rawhide swishing and slashing.

But Shann dodged back, balanced on the balls of his feet. Nevertheless, the Masked Rider's whip cut at his uplifted arm, and he cursed with pain and rage. Then he lunged at the masked man with the speed and savagery of a big cat, his whip uncurling and slashing at his antagonist's chest.

The Masked Rider laughed coldly, his own lash stabbing out to sear the burly man's throat.

Shann, the Robin Hood outlaw quickly saw, knew how to use a whip. While the black-garbed man was still off-balance, Shann drove in, his lash swishing low and looped wide, aimed at snaring the Masked Rider's ankles and dragging him to the ground. But the Masked Rider leaped high over the snarling lash, and even before his feet hit the ground his own whip was slashing wickedly in the same kind of blow.

THE lash coiled about one of Shann's ankles. The Masked Rider jerked, and Shann jarred against the ground. The masked man laughed tauntingly.

"Some of yore own medicine, Shann!" he said flatly. "How does it taste?"

But where Shann would have slashed his

antagonist to ribbons if their positions had been reversed, the Masked Rider stood calmly aside as Shann got warily to his feet.

While still on knee, Shann struck treacherously, with incredible speed. The lash coiled snakelike about the Masked Rider's ankles. Yelling with vicious triumph, Shann yanked powerfully, and the Masked Rider went down. Shann leaped in, changed ends with the whip and smashed savagely at the masked man's head with the loaded stock.

But the instant the Masked Rider touched the ground he had somersaulted backward. The whip stock struck his thighs. He bounded to his feet, bored in relentlessly, his lash cutting and hammering at Shann. The burly rancher backed away, then braced and came charging in furiously.

The Masked Rider met the attack head-on, and drove his adversary back again. Not giving Shann time to recover, he followed, his whip hissing and screaming as it slashed at the red-haired rancher's face, at his body and shoulders.

Shann stumbled, went to his knees. The Masked Rider lashed him to his feet again. He came up half-crouched, whirled, and leaped at the Masked Rider.

Dimly, the black-clad man heard Blue Hawk's warning shout, "Careful, Senor—a knife!" And he saw the gleam of sunlight on steel in the charging Shann's hand.

He leaped agilely aside, and the murderous blade made a shallow red mark across his throat. His eyes bleak and angry behind his domino mask, he leaped in on the treacherous rancher with his whip.

And now the lash was like a live thing, slashing, hammering, biting. Shann tried to catch his balance, to leap in again with the long-bladed knife. But the black-garbed man deftly eluded his lunges, moving in all the time. He drove the slashed and bleeding rancher back—back against the cabin wall.

And there Whip Shann quit cold. He flung the knife to the ground, turned his back to the Masked Rider and clutched at the rough logs with trembling hands.

The Masked Rider turned and looked at the silent Anchor riders. Stunned, unbelieving looks were on their hard faces.

"Turn around, Shann," the Masked Rider ordered harshly. And then, as the beaten rancher obeyed: "Now that yuh know how it feels, mebbe yuh won't be so free with that whip from here on!"

"What he needs is a hangnoose!" Nick Malone spat. "He killed my dad, or had it done."

"Mebbe, mebbe not," the masked man said calmly. "If he did, I promise yuh he'll pay in full for it. But we've got to be shore. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Nick agreed, after a brief hesitation. "The Masked Rider's word is good enough for me."

"I didn't beef the old hellion," Shann said hoarsely. "But the next time I line my sights on you, Masked Rider, yuh're dead!"

The Masked Rider shrugged contemptuously.

"I'll remember that. We're leavin' now, Shann, but that don't mean I'm through with yuh. We'll dump yore hardware down by the stream. I'd let 'em lay a good five minutes before I made a play."

CHAPTER XI

Death Underground

YOUNG Nick Malone swung into his saddle. The Masked Rider looked toward the shed where Blue Hawk was concealed, made a gesture with his hand that was meaningless to the watchers. Then he stepped around a corner of the ranchhouse and, followed by Nick Malone, vanished into the nearby timber.

There he mounted the black stallion Midnight and rode swiftly to the south with Nick Malone. He didn't expect pursuit from Shann's riders. For the moment Shann was cowed, had lost stature in the eyes of his men.

Besides, by the time they retrieved their guns and saddled horses their chances of overtaking the two would be hopeless.

Blue Hawk did not join them. But the Masked Rider knew the Yaqui was not far behind them, covering their retreat, alert for danger.

"Yuh acted plumb foolish, goin' to Shann's ranch alone," the Robin Hood outlaw told Nick as they rode along. "I'll speak plain, Malone. Until a few minutes ago I suspected—as do some others—that it was you that'd been tryin' to ruin yore father, that'd finally killed him. What I heard and saw back there showed me I was wrong."

"I know the talk that's been goin' about," Nick admitted. "Folks said I hated my father because we'd quarreled and he had kicked

me out. I'll admit that at first I did figger I'd been given a raw deal. But I was just a kid then, hot-headed, smart-alecky. And I never did hate him, never could. I came back to Sapphire Valley for just one reason—to show him I could make good on my own. I reckon I had a lot of his foolish pride. I swore I wouldn't go crawlin' to him and ask for forgiveness, and I guess he felt the same way about me. Now it's too late."

"But not too late to do somethin' about the one—or ones—who killed him," the Masked Rider said grimly. "Yuh got any proof it's Whip Shann behind all this?"

"No, I ain't. Just his hate for my father. What's yore idea, Masked Rider?"

The rider in the mask shrugged.

"I don't like to be accusin' anybody, unless I'm shore. One thing is certain: The big boss of the ruckus-raisin' goin' on hereabouts has a sizable gang on his payroll. Likely some of 'em are riders for different outfits in the basin. But probably most of 'em are renegades, wanted men. In that case, they've got to have a hideout."

"Way I figger it," Nick answered, "plenty of valleys and canyons up in the hills where a gang could hide. And lately I've suspected that—"

"What?" the masked man asked, as Nick paused.

"Well, some queer things have been goin' on about that deserted old mine on the Broken Bell, the Lily Belle," Nick declared. "I've seen lights there at night, and men messin' about the shacks in daytime. At first I figgered the outlaws might be usin' the old shaft as a hideout. But where would they keep their hosses?"

The Masked Rider shook his head.

"Anyhow, it's worth lookin' into," he said. "If it suits you, we'll ride over there right now."

"Suits me fine. I hid a lantern over there under a pile of old lumber several nights ago. Aimed to explore the shaft sometime when I had somebody along to work the hoist."

Almost an hour later, they approached the old mine shaft at the base of the red cliffs. There was absolutely no sign of life about the place. There was a melancholy air of decay and long desertion about the rotting sheds.

The Masked Rider and Nick dismounted. They entered the mine doorway and went along a passageway to the mouth of the shaft. The bucket, or "skip," was at the top, and when they examined the hoist they found it still workable. The hoist, which could be operated by one man, was in a shed near the shaftway entrance.

Nick had brought the lantern out from under the pile of lumber, and the Masked Rider lighted it. His movements, his words, were quick and decisive.

"I'm goin' down and have a look-see," he said. "You stay here and work the hoist. Lower me to the second level."

"*Bueno.* I'll keep a sharp look-out up here."

The Masked Rider, lantern in hand, stepped into the bucket. Almost instantly it began the descent of the timbered shaft. He knew that the painted bands on the cable running off the drum would tell Nick the bucket's downward progress.

THE dim light gradually faded above. Except for the lantern light he would have been in pitch blackness. The air grew heavy, humid. The Masked Rider was tense, tight-lipped. Was he taking too big a gamble on Nick Malone?

Suddenly the bucket gave a violent jerk, then started to plummet downward with dizzying sped. It fairly roared down the shaftway, while the cable hissed like a live thing. The Masked Rider, gripping the sides of the bucket as it shot wildly downward, glanced upward. Far above he could see a dim glow of light that marked the top of the shaft, but nothing more.

Bitterly, he blamed himself for placing too much trust in Nick Malone. Nick, apparently, was deliberately sending him to destruction at the bottom of the shaft.

The bucket continued its swaying, sickening descent. Within seconds now it would crash at the shaft's bottom. The Masked Rider braced himself for the terrific impact, knowing it would be hopeless.

Then, suddenly, a bare dozen feet from the bottom of the shaft, there was a second violent jerk on the cable. The downward plunge of the bucket was checked so abruptly that the masked man was flung to his knees. Despite the check, however, the bucket hit the earth with a crash that sent the Masked Rider tumbling headlong to the rocky ground.

He was partially stunned, but not badly hurt. He leaped to his feet and righted the overturned lantern. The bucket lay on its side nearby. Wondering at his miraculous escape from what had seemed like certain death, the Masked Rider looked about. He

was in a timber-walled tunnel that led off into the darkness. The air was musty, close, making breathing difficult.

Nearby was what looked like the base of a rough stairway leading upward. Now the Masked Rider remembered seeing the head of what appeared to be a stairway near the hoist shed above. He went into the narrow passageway with the lantern. It proved to be just that—a rotten, shored-up stairway.

The Masked Rider started climbing the rotting steps. If Nick Malone had tried to kill him, as seemed probable, then he was still in deadly danger. The killer would try to make certain he never left the old mine alive.

When he got near enough to the top to see a grayish splotch of light above, he extinguished the lantern. Then he crept up the old stairway, silent as a stalking cougar. As he reached the stairhead, he saw Blue Hawk standing at the shaft entrance. A rifle was in the Yaqui's hand, and he was peering anxiously down the dark shaft.

Near Blue Hawk stood Nick Malone, blood running over one side of his dark face. The Masked Rider stepped out of the stairway, guns in hand.

"Here I am, Hawk," he said grimly. "Not down in that hole, dead, like some sidewinder hoped I'd be!"

Both Blue Hawk and Nick Malone whirled.

"Senor!" the Yaqui exclaimed. "Are you hurt?"

"Just shook up a bit. No thanks to this jasper, though. Looks like you showed up just in time, Hawk."

"Yes!" Puzzlement showed in Blue Hawk's eyes, then he shook his head. "But it is not like you think, Senor. It was not the fault of the Senor Malone. Look—in the hoist shed."

The Masked Rider stepped to the door of the hoist shed and peered inside. A man lay sprawled on the floor, motionless. Obviously he was dead.

"That hombre sneaked up on me while I was lowerin' the bucket," Nick explained. "I saw him too late to duck, and he slugged me over the head with that wrench there beside him. I was knocked out for a couple of minutes. Long enough for you to have crashed at the bottom of the shaft. We didn't know but what yuh had."

"You killed this man, Hawk?" asked the Masked Rider.

"Yes, Senor. I was behind the lumber over there, watching. I saw this hombre sneak into the shed. I ran forward, and shot him just as he struck the Senor Malone down. I managed to check the bucket's descent, but I was afraid I had been too late."

"Just in time, as usual, Hawk. I'm sorry I misjudged yuh again, Malone."

"Forget it, Masked Rider. Yuh find anything down there?"

"I was too interested in gettin' out to look around. But I'm goin' back down. Yuh know that hombre?"

NICK turned the dead man over. He was a squat, bald, buck-toothed man.

"Not his name nor where he worked," Nick declared. "I've seen him loafin' about Silver Bow a couple of times with some other hardcases."

"Likely a member of the raider gang," decided the Masked Rider. "There may be more of 'em about. Nick, raise the bucket and lower me into the shaft again. Hawk, get back outside and keep a sharp watch. If yuh see anything suspicious, shoot first and then ask questions!"

"Yes, Senor!"

Five minutes later the Masked Rider was again watching the timbered sides of the shaft flash past him. He reached the bottom without incident this time, and stepped out of the bucket onto the landing stage. The place was quiet as a tomb. The lantern in his hand burned with a steady, murky glow.

He stepped out into the drift and followed the rocky corridor for a short distance, alert and wary. The floor of the tunnel, littered with rocks and dirt, showed no signs of anybody having been here lately. Narrow gauge tracks, in a bad state of disrepair, ran along the middle of the corridor. An ore car lay on its side.

The man in black wandered deeper into the subterranean tunnels. His footsteps echoed hollowly. Somewhere he heard the trickle of water, but otherwise the silence seemed to crowd in upon him, ancient and sinister. He had the unpleasant feeling that unseen and hostile eyes were staring at him from the stygian blackness outside the puny lantern glow.

Suddenly he heard a low sound ahead of him—a stealthy, scraping sound, like a boot-heel being dragged across rock. He leaped aside, toward a shallow niche in the wall.

Instantly, two red streamers of flame lashed out from the tunnel ahead of him. Two bullets slashed into the tunnel wall. Thunderous sound beat at his eardrums.

CHAPTER XII

Cowman's Trick

QUICKLY the Masked Rider extinguished the lantern. He crouched in the inadequate shelter of the niche that had been made by caving timbers. The black guns were in his hands. He waited, straining eyes and ears.

The tunnel was incredibly silent now, except for the same low sound of trickling water. The stench of burnt powder drifted to his nostrils. Obviously the unseen gunmen were also waiting, crouched like coiled rattlers there in the dark, for him to give his position away.

The Masked Rider raked the muzzle of one of his guns along the wall. Instantly, those scarlet lances of gun flame licked out toward him wickedly. Bullets snarled like angry hornets inches from his head, showering him with splinters and dirt.

The snarling boom of his own guns was like the angry roll of giant drums. Powder

[*Turn page*]

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flame lighted the tunnel with a weird red glow.

He heard a moaning sigh, then a sound like that of a body thudding against the tunnel floor. Only one gun answered him from the spot where the first shots had come. But from still farther along the tunnel another gun blazed and roared.

The Masked Rider leaped suddenly from the niche and ran half-crouched along the tunnel, firing with calm, deadly precision at the nearest gun flashes. And abruptly the fire from this gun stopped. He heard the gun clatter against the rocky floor, and knew that the killer was dead or badly wounded.

The fire from the gun farther along the tunnel had also stopped. The masked man head a low, scraping sound from that direction. He leaped to one side, flattening against the wall, and blasted two shots at the spot.

"Let up, cuss and dang yuh, Masked Rider!" a voice yelled. "I know it's you 'cause I saw yuh in the gun flashes."

Amazement slapped at the masked man. There was something decidedly familiar about that voice. Unbelievable as it was, it was the voice of old Blackjack Malone!

Wary of a trick, the Masked Rider called; "That you, Blackjack?"

"'Course it's me! I wasn't shootin' at you. I was helpin' yuh fight them skunks over there."

"Strike a match and hold it close to yore face!"

A match scraped, flared, and in its flickering red glow the Masked Rider could see the seamed, bearded features of old Blackjack Malone. Not trying to understand this new mystery, the Masked Rider returned to the niche, found the lantern, lighted it.

Blackjack clumped forward. He was grinning impishly.

"Thought I was a ghost, eh?" he chuckled.

"If I believed in ghosts, mebbe I would have," the black-clad man admitted. "Yuh got some explainin' to do, Blackjack—and it better be good. First, though, let's take a look at these hombres."

Both of the bushwhackers, sprawled on the tunnel floor behind the boulder where they had been crouched, were dead.

"Don't know their names," Blackjack declared in answer to the Masked Rider's question. "But they was members of the outlaw gang that's been raisin' so much devilment, the gang that kidnaped me from Harvey Boyd's house two nights ago. Their hideout's over in Devil's Gorge, a few miles north of here."

"They took yuh to their hideout after they kidnaped yuh?" the Masked Rider asked quickly.

"Shore did! I can take yuh right to it. Where they made their mistake was in not beefin' me quick."

"Wait! I figger what yuh've got to tell is mighty important, Blackjack. But first, let's get these bodies up to the top of the shaft. Yore son's up there, Blackjack. Like nearly everybody else, he thinks yuh're dead—and it took that to make him realize what a stiff-necked fool he'd been. So when yuh get up there, get that bow out of yore own neck, yuh old puma, or I'll toss yuh back down into this hole and let yuh stay!"

"Reckon it's already out," Blackjack said huskily.

They carried the bodies of the dead outlaws to the shaft and dumped them into the bucket. The masked man shouted up the shaft, and a moment later there was an answering shout from above, then the low sputter of the donkey engine. The masked man and Blackjack got into the bucket. The cable jerked, tightened, and the bucket began to rise.

NICK MALONE'S eyes flared wide as the Masked Rider and Blackjack stepped from the bucket. His face went dead white and he seemed rooted to the spot.

"Dad!" he said hoarsely. "I thought—is it really you?"

"Ain't my ghost, son. Fit as a fiddle and twice as rackety!"

Blackjack grinned, strode forward and slapped his son on the shoulder in an affectionate gesture.

The Masked Rider turned his back on the scene, started lifting the bodies from the bucket. Inside him was a warm, satisfied feeling.

"All right, Blackjack," he said, after a few moments. "And like I said, it better be good. Start at the beginnin'."

"Which is when this Masked Rider gent—or so I thought then—sneaked in through a window of Harvey Boyd's house and stuck a gun in my middle," said Blackjack. "He told me to get on my clothes and come with him, which I done. The cuss wouldn't tell me why, or who, wanted me, but I was right shore I was on my last ride. We made a

beeline for Devil's Gorge, where there was mebbe a dozen other tough hombres. The gorge was their hideout."

"Where is this Devil's Gorge?" asked the masked man.

"Up in the roughest part of the hills. Some might call it a valley, but it's really a wide spot in a canyon—mebbe half a mile at its widest—with high rock walls on both sides and narrow passes at each end. It's heavy timbered, and the two cabins near the far end can't be seen from above for the trees. That's why they ain't been spotted before this.

"Well, this hombre—he took off his mask and cloak soon as we was clear of town—took me there, and after battin' me about some they locked me inside one of these cabins. Seems like they was waitin' for their boss to show up so's he could have the pleasure of puttin' me away personal."

"Yuh didn't hear or see anything that gave yuh a clue as to who this boss might be?"

"Not a thing. I wanted to know who the skunk was, all right, but I figgered it wouldn't help me to find out, because I'd be cold meat soon afterwards. The cabin roof was made out of planks and sod. So I pulled loose a rotten plank and, usin' a poker, dug my way out. I was clean out of the gorge before they cottoned onto what was up. Then they took out after me, like a pack of wolves. They chased me the rest of that night, some of 'em always close, with me runnin', hidin', tumblin' into canyons and near breakin' my neck."

"But that body this cowboy Morgan found in the creek," Nick blurted. "It was about yore size and age, had on yore clothes, had yore tally-book and other things in the pockets."

"I was comin' to that." Blackjack grinned again. "Just about daylight I'd climbed down into a deep canyon. One of these outlaws, a kind of old codger but mean, started down after me. Wasn't lively as me. He made a misstep and tumbled a couple hundred feet down into the canyon, landin' right at my feet. I never saw a feller worse messed up than him. It give me an idea. He was about my size, and the way his face was battered up nobody could tell him from Adam's off ox.

"So, I says to myself, why not change clothes with him, leavin' my personal effects in the pockets, and let folks think it was me? Way I figgered it, when news of my death got about, mebbe the sidewinder that was behind all this would get careless. Mebbe he'd come out of his hole, and show what was behind the whole business. So I done that, leavin' the body there in the edge of the creek where it'd be almost certain to be found. That day, I made my way on down here to this old shaft, figgerin' it'd be a good place to hide out. But I reckon my scheme didn't turn out so good."

"It would have been a good idea, if it had fooled the outlaws," declared the Masked Rider. "But I doubt if it did."

"I found that out, by gonnies! They trailed me down here, and down the shored-up stairway into the mine. Them two hombres that tried to bushwhack yuh, Masked Rider, was down there lookin' for me. I felt like a blasted mole in a trap."

"Senor!" Blue Hawk called warningly from his nearby place of concealment. "Somebody comes. One rider."

LISTENING intently, the three near the shaft heard a thud of hoofs. Then a horse and rider burst through a belt of timber a hundred yards away and came swiftly toward them.

"A girl, Senor!"

It was true. The rider was slender-bodied, graceful in the saddle, her hair a dark banner in the wind.

"Rose!" Nick cried suddenly. "What are you doin' here?"

Rose Demming came on at a gallop, halting her palomino pony a few yards away. Wind and sun had whipped high color into her face, making it even more lovely than the Masked Rider remembered it. She leaped agilely to the ground and ran forward.

"Nick!" There was relief in her voice. "I've been searching everywhere for you. I thought I might find—"

She broke off, her dark eyes riveted on Blackjack Malone. Plainly the old rancher was enjoying the girl's bewilderment.

"Nope, gal, I ain't no speerit," he chuckled. "Still alive and full of devilment!"

"So it was true!" she whispered.

"What was true?" the Masked Rider asked quickly.

"What I heard—that Blackjack Malone was alive, that he had escaped from his captors. But that was only part of it. I wanted to tell Nick first, so I rode out to his ranch."

Rose paused again, her wide eyes on the two dead men.

"That's part of the story," the masked man told her gently. "Yuh'll learn all of it, later. But first, tell us what it was yuh heard. It may be important."

"It is important," she declared. "Late last night I accidentally heard two men talking in the Rainbow Bar. I didn't know their names, nor what they did, although I'd seen them in the saloon before and knew they were toughs. They were partly drunk, and didn't know I overheard what they said. I couldn't hear all they said—just enough to piece the words together and make some sense out of them."

"Yuh think they were members of the raider gang?"

"Yes! I heard them mention Blackjack Malone's name, say something about his escaping. The boss, they said, was furious."

"They say who the boss was?" Nick broke in.

"No. But they said something else I considered almost as important. They said the boss had called a meeting at the hideout in Devil's Gorge for midnight tonight. The whole gang was to be there, including the big boss himself. There the leader was to outline plans for a final big raid on the Broken Bell, to wipe it out—burn the buildings, kill the cattle, kill anybody who tried to interfere. As soon as it was daylight I saddled my pony and rode to Nick's place. He wasn't there, and I've been searching frantically for him ever since."

For a moment there was silence among the little group. Triumph was rioting through the Masked Rider. His keen mind was already looking ahead and planning.

"I gonnies, gal, yuh shore hit the jackpot that time!" the oldster exclaimed. "Yuh thinkin' the same thing I am, Masked Rider?"

"If yuh're thinkin' this is the chance we've been waitin' for—the chance to capture, or wipe out, the whole gang—then I am," declared the black-garbed man promptly. "And if we can find the leader there it will be a piece of luck. I'm already right shore who he is, but if we capture him with the gang it will be all the proof a court needs to convict him."

"Ten to one it's Whip Shann," Blackjack muttered darkly. "I'd like to jerk the rope that sends him to perdition!"

The Masked Rider said nothing to that. As usual, he did not expound his theories until he was absolutely certain he was right.

"Yuh deserve a lot of praise, Miss Demming, and I reckon Nick'll see yuh get it," he declared warmly, and watched color rise in the girl's face. "Tonight should see the finish of the gang that's caused so much misery and ruin. It will also be yore job, Nick, to ride into town and notify the sheriff and help him organize a big posse. Wait till well after dark to leave town, so's none of the gang will see yuh and get suspicious. That will still allow plenty of time to reach Devil's Gorge. The attack won't be made till after midnight, for we want to make shore every member of the gang is in the trap, includin' the leader. Everything clear?"

Nick nodded.

"Plumb clear," Nick answered. "But how about you, Masked Rider? You aim to be in on the kill?"

"I'll be there," the masked man said grimly. "I'll join the posse somewheres between Silver Bow and the Devil's Gorge. I'll try to arrange a truce with the sheriff till after the fight's over."

"That won't be hard, after I tell him what yuh've done," Blackjack growled. "Well, by jacks, let's be rattlin' our hocks. Come midnight, I aim to sink my fangs into some raw wolf meat!"

CHAPTER XIII

Death Trap

IN THE cavalcade that forged steadily deeper into the night-shrouded hills, were grim-eyed men. At their head rode square-faced Sheriff Ben Paris. On one side he was flanked by old Blackjack Malone, on the other by the black-garbed Masked Rider on the powerful black stallion Midnight.

Next in line were Nick Malone and Blue Hawk. The trailing possemen, a score in all, had been hand-picked. They were honest men, cowboys and townsmen, each eager to see that the blight which had plagued Sapphire Valley was erased forever.

There was little talk among the riders. The only sounds were the thud of hoofs against rocky earth, the creak of saddle leather. A round moon was in the sky, pointing the way with silvery fingers of light. A cool wind blew through the canyons and timbered ridges.

Sheriff Paris, although only half-convinced

of the Masked Rider's innocence, had nevertheless agreed to a twenty-four hour truce. That was all the Robin Hood outlaw asked. Before then, he was sure, his own and Blue Hawk's work on this range would be finished and they would be many miles away. Once again grim justice would have been meted out to evil men who sought to rob and destroy.

He had been about ready for the showdown, even before learning from Rose Demming of this night's meeting of the outlaw gang. He had chosen this method because it afforded the opportunity not only of capturing the leader but of wiping out the entire gang.

It was well after midnight. For the last several miles the country had become increasingly rough. Grim, frowning walls and ridges rose on all sides of the cavalcade.

"Lower entrance to the gorge is half a mile ahead," Blackjack Malone said suddenly. "Gorge starts widenin' just inside the pass."

"How far to the pass at the far end?" asked the Masked Rider.

"Mebbe two miles. Cabins are close to the far end."

"They might have lookouts stationed at the lower pass," the man in black suggested. "Mightn't it be a good idea, Sheriff, to have a man scout ahead and take a look-see?"

The sheriff called a halt.

"Was thinkin' the same thing myself," he grunted. "Who'll volunteer for the job?"

As if at an unspoken command from the Masked Rider, Blue Hawk pushed his gray quickly forward.

"I will go, Senor," the Yaqui said softly.

Nobody objected, and Blue Hawk rode quickly into the shadows.

Sheriff Paris outlined his plan of action.

"Once we're inside the gorge, we'll leave the hosses and go forward afoot. We'll try to surprise 'em. I don't want a shot fired till the cabins are surrounded and I give the signal. Everybody savvy?"

The possemen nodded silent assent. The Masked Rider said nothing. The sheriff's plan seemed like a good one. If an emergency arose, he could use his own judgment.

In an amazingly short time Blue Hawk reappeared. He reported directly to the Masked Rider:

"One guard was at the pass."

"One's plenty to spill the beans, if he spots us," growled the sheriff. "We've got to make shore of him."

"He will not spill the beans, Senor," the Yaqui said coldly.

"Oh!" Sheriff Paris stared at the Indian. "Oh, I see. Well, that bein' the case, let's go for'ard!"

The cavalcade moved forward again. The men were tense, watchful, their faces set in determined lines. A hand of each one clutched a rifle, or hovered near a holstered six-shooter.

They had been riding along a depression between two timbered slopes. Now the slopes drew in sharply before them, became bare, frowning walls. Slashing sharply through the walls to where a ribbon of moonlight showed beyond was a narrow pass that was less than fifty feet in width.

Riding unchallenged through the gap, they found themselves inside what was in reality a long, narrow valley. The valley floor was densely covered with thickets, scrubby timber and underbrush. Sheer, frowning walls rose abruptly from the valley floor, widening gradually, then as gradually converging again until, in the far moonlight, the riders could see where the walls apparently met at the upper end of the valley.

Leading away from the entrance, and obviously toward the unseen cabins, was a dim pathway through the thickets and underbrush. The possemen followed this path for perhaps a mile, guns in hand, eyes hard and alert. Each man was keyed to a high pitch, eager for the showdown fight with the raider gang.

SUDDENLY the earth trembled beneath them. The air quivered with the vibrations from a rumbling, violent explosion directly ahead of them.

The riders jerked their mounts to a skittering halt. Terse questions tumbled from their lips.

"A big charge of dynamite," said the Masked Rider tensely. "Listen!"

The thunderous echoes from the explosion had died away, but in the night ahead they could hear a rumbling, clattering noise that was like a huge landslide roaring down a mountainside.

"Sounds like that's about at the upper entrance to the gorge," Blackjack Malone declared. "What'n tarnation yuh reckon it is?"

"They've dynamited the entrance, likely blocked it," snapped the Masked Rider, his alert mind already realizing the probable significance of the explosion. "Men, looks

like we've been drawn into a trap of some kind!"

Sheriff Paris swore with puzzlement.

"What good would it do 'em to block that pass?"

"I don't know—yet. But I figger we'd better fall back toward the lower entrance."

The possemen, their tension increased by the unknown quantity of what was happening, eagerly accepted the Masked Rider's suggestion. They whirled their mounts and started riding at a gallop back through the dense thickets toward the pass through which they had come a short time before.

"Look!" one of the riders suddenly yelled. "Somethin's burnin' down there!"

It was true, the masked man saw instantly, and his broad lips tightened grimly in the shadows. In the direction of the lower entrance to Devil's Gorge, the sky glowed redly. Although they could not yet see the blaze, the crimson glow danced weirdly over the towering rock walls. Smoke boiled upward, and they could hear a hissing, crackling sound.

Now the Masked Rider knew the full significance of the blocked upper pass.

They had crashed through a belt of scrubby timber when old Blackjack cried out:

"By ding, the whole cussed valley's aburnin'! The sidewinders aim to roast us like rats!"

The riders dragged their horses to a halt, appalled by what they saw. Before them was a leaping, writhing wall of flame, stretching from wall to wall across the lower end of the gorge and hopelessly cutting them off from the pass. Driven by a strong wind that moaned through the canyon, the flames were racing toward them with incredible speed.

It had been an almost rainless summer, and now the grass, underbrush and thickets that covered the valley floor from end to end were tinder-dry. Realization came slowly to the staring, pale-faced possemen. Within a few minutes the whole gorge would be a seething inferno in which nothing could live!

The heat was almost unbearable on their faces now. Sparks and flaming twigs showered about them. A surflike roar beat in their ears.

A rider swore bitterly.

"Trapped!" he said. "Ain't there any other way out of this hole?"

"Not if the upper pass is blocked," Blackjack declared. "The walls are too steep to climb. But it don't make sense, ding-bust it. If we're trapped in here, so are them owlhooters!"

The Masked Rider shook his head.

"I doubt it. The plain fact is, they've outsmarted us. We should have tumbled to what was up when we got through the pass so easy. It'd be a safe bet that none of them outlaws are inside the Gorge."

"Yuh mean the whole thing was a scheme to trap us here in Devil's Gorge and wipe us out?"

"That's the way it looks to me. The two hombres Rose Demming heard talkin' in the Rainbow Bar probably was there for just that purpose. The boss figgered that Rose would go to the law with what she'd heard. He knew that, with Blackjack's escape, the hideout here in Devil's Gorge had lost its value. The supposed meetin' here tonight was the bait he hoped would draw most of his enemies into a trap that would wipe 'em out at one blow. And, so far, it's worked!"

"We aim to just set here and burn?" demanded a rider.

Midnight, made restless by the advancing wall of flames, reared and wheeled.

"Fall back!" the Masked Rider ordered sharply. "We've got to stay ahead of the fire. Mebbe the upper pass ain't entirely blocked."

ONCE again the band of desperate men wheeled their horses and raced back along Devil's Gorge. Their enemy now was not the outlaw gang, but something even more sinister and deadly. A weird red mist seemd to shroud the canyon. The walls on each side of them towered dark and hostile. As the riders gained on the flames the heat lessened, but the relief would be only momentary. Within minutes the entire gorge would be a steaming oven.

As the Masked Rider had expected, the two log cabins near the upper end of the canyon were deserted and dark. The pole corral was empty. The cabins were closely hemmed by underbrush and timber. They offered no safety—they would burn.

The black-garbed rider pounded on past the cabins and toward what a short while before had been a second outlet from the gorge. The narrow fissure had simply vanished. The tremendous explosion had caved in the walls as if they had been cardboard. The huge mass of boulders and shale towered upward solidly for a hundred feet. It offered no hope for escape.

The Masked Rider whirled Midnight and raced back to where the possemen were grouped near the cabins. Desperation and panic had set their faces in harsh lines. The flames, whipped to a screaming red fury by the wind, were advancing along the canyon with unbelievable speed. Its writhing tentacles covered the gorge from wall to wall.

Instinctively the possemen, staring into the wicked red eyes of death, turned to the stalwart, black-garbed rider for leadership. They were like children, bewildered, unashamedly frightened, although they would have walked unflinchingly into the muzzles of roaring guns.

"The pass is blocked, like I figgered," the Masked Rider said swiftly. "We've got to—"

"Senor!" Blue Hawk suddenly interrupted. "Look! A rider, coming through the flames!"

As one man the group whirled, their eyes following the Yaqui's pointing finger. Like a flame-spawned ghost, a horse and rider were driving out of that boiling mass. The rider was bent low in the saddle, quirting his reeling mount. A wiry, bearded oldster, his clothes were half burned from his body.

But incredibly he had come through the leaping wall of fire and was spurring toward the upper end of the Gorge. If he saw the group of horsemen near the cabins he paid them no heed.

"It's one of them blasted owlhooters that set the canyon afire!" one of the possemen shouted harshly. "Cut the skunk down!"

He snatched out his gun and blasted a shot at the rider. The shot missed, and the wiry outlaw flung a startled glance over his shoulder, showing his panic-stricken, fire-singed features.

"Stop it!" the Masked Rider said sharply, and slapped the gun aside as the posseman was steadying for another shot. "That hombre didn't come through the flames for nothin'!"

At a softly spoken word from its rider, the great black stallion leaped forward toward the racing horseman. Instead of the black guns, in his hands was the rope he had snatched from his saddle. Swiftly the powerful stallion overhauled the outlaw's dun. The rope snaked out.

Unerringly, the noose settled over the outlaw's shoulders, Midnight's hoofs churned the earth as, unbidden, he halted. The rope tightened, and the raider was jerked from saddle. He hit the ground with a jarring thud. Before he could regain his senses the Masked Rider had leaped to the ground, pounced on him like a black panther, snatched his gun from its holster.

The fire-singed outlaw struggled furiously.

"Let up, yuh fool!" he snarled. "Yuh want to burn?"

"Not any more than you do," the Masked Rider said coldly. "What happened? Why'd yuh ride back this way?"

"I got trapped by the fire!" The oldster cursed bitterly, glancing wildly at the advancing flames. "I couldn't go back through the pass, so I had to take my chances this way."

"Yuh knew the upper pass had been dynamited, didn't yuh?"

"Shore, I knew it. But—"

"But what?" the Masked Rider said harshly, as the raider paused. He seized the oldster, shook him savagely, his eyes relentless behind the domino mask. "Listen, hombre! Yuh come through that fire and yuh'll go back into it—unless yuh talk fast. You know a way out of here, or yuh wouldn't have come through that fire. Talk!"

"No! Honest, I don't!"

"Then get back onto that hoss and head back the way yuh come! And if yuh try to turn back I'll fill yuh full of lead!"

The bearded outlaw's hesitation was brief. He looked into the masked man's merciless eyes, glanced hurriedly at the hissing wall of fire, and terror made its ugly pattern on his face.

"I don't aim to burn," he whimpered. "There ain't any way out of here. But I know a place where we'll be safe. That's where I was headed."

"Lead out, then—fast!"

CHAPTER XIV

"While Rome Burned"

POSSEMEN had gathered about the Masked Rider and his captive. Fresh hope sprang into their eyes. Eagerly they followed the outlaw oldster as he led the way toward a spot at one side of the gorge. There, concealed by a dense jackpine thicket, they found a break in the wall. Although the break would not let them out of the canyon, it extended for perhaps a hundred yards back into the cliffs and was bare of timber or underbrush.

Here was safety from the ravaging flames.

They rode back into the break and waited there as the roaring flames advanced. The heat, even here, was terrific.

The flames, having vented their wrath on Devil's Gorge, died down almost as quickly as they had started. In the moonlight Devil's Gorge was a charred and blackened wasteland overhung by a pall of smoke. In spots, fires still smoldered, casting their sullen red glow.

The possemen, still a little appalled by the closeness of their escape from death, rode out of the fissure in the cliffs. Their wrath against the outlaws who had drawn them into this death trap, which for the moment had been shoved into the background by the immediate, more deadly peril of the fire, now returned tenfold. And the bearded captive, because he was the only one present, felt that wrath's quick violence.

Sheriff Ben Paris dragged the raider from his horse and slammed him against the ground.

"Start talkin', hombre!" he said harshly. "Where's the rest of yore skunky gang—and who's yore leader? Yuh've got just thirty seconds to spit it out!"

But the oldster had regained some of his courage and refused to be cowed. He snarled at his captors defiantly.

"Nothin' yuh could do to me would be worse'n what I just went through," he declared. "As to the gang, they're just a bunch of saddle bums and riffraff. They broke up and most of 'em left the valley today."

"Who's yore boss?"

The oldster shrugged.

"That's somethin' yuh'll never get out of me. I'd rather take my chance with the law than with him after I'd doublecrossed him."

The sheriff swung his fist in a looping blow that smashed the renegade to the ground again.

"Talk, you sidewinder, or I'll—"

"That won't be necessary, Sheriff!" The Masked Rider's voice was like a whiplash. "I knew who the leader was even before we came here tonight, but I hoped to catch him with the gang to make his conviction more certain. Where I slipped up was in lettin' him outfox me. I'd suggest, Sheriff, that yuh send a couple of men into town—to arrest Harvey Boyd!"

A murmur of surprise ran through the group.

"Yuh must be loco, Masked Rider!" old Blackjack Malone snapped. "Harvey Boyd is one of my best friends!"

"He's yore worst enemy," the masked man said flatly. "While pretendin' to be yore best friend, he plotted to ruin and kill yuh."

"Yuh mean he's the boss of them raiders?"

"No, only an accomplice of the boss. The real boss, I think, will be found at Clayton Robards' cabin. That's where I'm headed for, right now!"

The huge stallion reared, pawing the air as he wheeled and came down in a dead run, headed back along the fire-ravaged Devil's Gorge toward the lower pass.

The masked man rode low in the saddle, his black cloak billowing out behind him. He knew that Blue Hawk, on the gray, and Sheriff Paris' possemen were close behind him, but he never looked back. He thundered the length of the smoke-filled canyon and through the narrow pass at its lower end.

The Masked Rider's face was grim and implacable, his mind filled with one unshakable purpose, as he rode wildly through the night-shrouded hills. He had tossed caution aside. He had allowed himself to be outguessed and outmaneuvered by the shrewd and cunning outlaw boss. His laxity had come close to causing his own death and the deaths of a score of other men. Now he felt that this final showdown was his personal responsibility.

Less than five miles from Devil's Gorge was the cabin of Clayton Robards—mild-appearing, well-educated Clayton Robards who, hiding his own evil and scheming nature beneath a veneer of hatred for violence and wickedness, had plotted the ruin and death of Blackjack Malone. Almost from the first the Masked Rider had suspected the bespectacled Robards, and today the suspicion in his mind had become a certainty.

JUST how, or to what extent, the banker, Harvey Boyd, was implicated, he was not sure. But he was certain of the fact that the banker was guilty of some part in the crimes.

Miles flashed by beneath the racing black's drumming hoofs. As if sensing the urgency of the rider's mission, the great stallion ran with all the incredible speed and power of which he was capable. He thundered along spiny ridges, crashed recklessly through thickets, leaped into and out of gaping chasms where a misstep would have meant disaster. The wind stung the Masked Rider's face and roared away behind him.

As he neared Robards' cabin, he slowed the black. Two hundred yards from the cabin he dismounted and, with a soft word to the gallant stallion, went forward afoot.

Robards was singing and playing the piano. As on that other night, the music was mellow and hauntingly beautiful, seeming to merge with the night and become a part of its enchantment, of the soft moonlight and the wind's pagan whisper in the dark pines.

The Masked Rider's lips twisted with bitter irony. A man who made beautiful music—and plotted to steal a fortune. A man who loved beautiful pictures—and with diabolical cruelty had ordered that a man for whom he professed friendship be buried with only his head out of the burning sand to die a horrible death. This was the same man who read the world's great classics—and coldbloodedly plotted the deaths of a score of men in a man-made inferno!

The masked man reached the edge of the clearing, paused. Lamplight glowed in the big front room of the cabin, and through an open, unshaded window the Masked Rider could see Robards seated at the piano. And at the tie-bar before the cabin he could see the shadowy bulk of a horse. Robards obviously had company.

Twenty feet from the window, and directly in front of it, was a big pine tree. Silent as a huge black cat, the Masked Rider ran forward and gained the shelter of the tree trunk. From his position he could look straight into the room.

To one side of Robards a man sat in a padded chair. That man was Harvey Boyd!

Boyd was smoking a cigar, and watching Robards. Now something hard, something cold and scheming, showed on the banker's broad features and in his pale eyes. Now, with his guard down, the man's greed and ruthlessness showed plainly.

Robards finished the melancholy song, turned and looked smilingly at Boyd.

"Thus, my friend, do I express the beautiful thoughts that are in my heart," he murmured. "Only the unsullied of mind and soul can make beautiful music or write a lovely poem."

The banker laughed sardonically.

"Or bury a man alive, eh, Robards?"

"There are many different kinds of beauty," Robards said, still smiling. "Torture can be one of them—or even death."

"If you feel that way, it's a pity you couldn't have seen what happened in Devil's Gorge tonight."

"I would have enjoyed it," Robards continued. "But it would have been too risky. Somebody might have visited my cabin in my absence—as this cowboy, Wayne Morgan, did once before—and seen things they were not supposed to see. I hope this Morgan was in that posse."

"He likely was. The Masked Rider, too. You think it's all over by now?"

"Probably so. I gave orders that the explosion was not to be set off until they were well into the canyon. You heard the explosion and saw the flames reflected against the sky. Yes, undoubtedly most of our enemies—including Blackjack Malone—are dead by now. The Masked Rider was dangerous. In time, if he had lived, he might have learned the truth and ruined our plans."

"He was smart," said Boyd, "but evidently not too smart to fall for that slick trick you pulled."

"Stupid fools, all of them!" Robards' lips curled contemptuously. "Dead fools, now!"

"And that's just what you'll be, Robards, if yuh make a crooked move!" a cold voice snapped. "That goes for you, too, Boyd!"

Harvey Boyd half-leaped from his chair, stark surprise and consternation on his face as he twisted his head about to stare at the black-garbed man who had leaped through the doorway into the room.

The gaunt, bespectacled Robards obviously possessed nerves of steel. He sat still, his thin features without visible emotion, staring at the Masked Rider.

THE MASKED RIDER'S black guns were in his hands, covering the two men. His eyes behind the mask were without mercy.

"Set back down, Boyd!" he ordered flatly. "Neither of yuh deserve to live, and I'd as soon kill yuh as take yuh prisoner!"

"So?" Robards murmured softly. "The great Masked Rider did not die, after all!"

"No, and neither did Blackjack Malone nor any of the others yuh hoped to burn alive!"

Harvey Boyd sank back into the padded chair. His face had gone chalk-white.

"In that case, we're ruined. Robards, I tried to tell you we were making a mistake."

"Shut up, Harvey! You talk too much—and lose your nerve too easily." Robards still spoke calmly, softly, but there was a wicked edge to his voice. "I can see it would be useless to try to bluff you, Masked Rider, or to deny my guilt."

"Plumb useless! Yuh can either make a fight of it, or surrender and be turned over to the law for trial."

"Violence is for the stupid and uncouth. I detest it," Robards sneered. "Besides, you seem to have the best of the argument. Just how much do you know?"

"Enough to send yuh to the gallows. Mebbe both of yuh."

"No!" Harvey Boyd said shrilly. "You've got nothing on me, Masked Rider. It is no crime to visit a man's cabin. Whatever Clayton Robards may have done, I am not implicated."

"Lyin' won't help!" the Masked Rider said grimly. "Anyway, a cowboy named Wayne Morgan might be able to prove otherwise. I know Morgan and have been workin' with him. It was one of yore lies that aroused Morgan's suspicions in the first place, Boyd."

"I told Morgan no lie!"

"Yes, yuh did! Morgan told me about them imported cigars yuh smoke, Robards—about their sweetish aroma, and the bands on 'em stamped 'Made in Singapore'. He told me how, when he visited yore office in the bank, Boyd, he smelled that aroma, and later spotted one of the cigar butts in an ash-tray on yore desk. Yet when he asked if Robards had been in to see yuh lately, yuh lied. Yuh claimed yuh hadn't seen Robards in weeks, scarcely knew him.

"Morgan knew Robards had been in yore office only a few minutes before. If yuh hadn't been mixed up with him in some kind of crooked work, why would yuh have lied about his havin' been there?"

"Why—why—that doesn't prove anything!" the banker stammered. "Yes, I lied about Robards being in the bank. But I had reasons —personal reasons."

"I don't doubt it," the masked man said as he shrugged. "Wayne Morgan also told me how yuh insisted on Blackjack Malone spendin' the night at yore house. Yuh postponed makin' him that personal loan till the next day, because yuh knew it would never be made, because yuh planned to have Malone kidnaped that night. Yuh faked the Masked Rider's part in the kidnapin', faked yore fight with him. It was all too pat, Boyd, and after Morgan got to thinkin' about it he became suspicious.

"It all added up—it still does!"

"You're just making it all up!" the banker cried desperately, for he apparently had no other rebuttal.

CHAPTER XV

Killer's Requiem

BOYD had slumped loosely in his chair. His eyes were desperate, the eyes of a cornered animal.

"You can't prove any of that," he muttered to the Masked Rider. "It's all guess work. Robards, you could clear me, you could swear I had nothing to do with any of it."

"I could, my friend, but I won't," Robards said coldly. "You lie very poorly, Harvey, so poorly you wouldn't have a chance with a jury. And we both made the mistake of underrating the shrewdness of two men—Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider. Such an error might easily prove disastrous."

"It already has, Robards," the masked avenger said coldly. "Another mistake was in sendin' a man to do murder with such an unusual knife—a knife with a wavy blade, a Malay kris. Wayne Morgan was the only man in the saloon who recognized the knife for what it was. He had seen one exactly like it here in this room when he came here that first night with Blackjack Malone."

Clayton Robards had lifted from the top of the piano a slender, reedlike instrument. Probably two feet in length, it apparently was hollow, and made of highly polished wood. Robards rubbed his slender fingers thoughtfully along the tube's polished surface.

"So?" he murmured. "My only mistake there was in leaving such unusual objects about where some stupid lout like Russ Tolbert might be tempted to steal it. I did not miss the kris until after I learned that Tolbert had used it in his attempt to kill this cowboy Morgan. Then it was too late. You see, Masked Rider, I deny nothing. I gambled greatly, and if I have lost I will not whine like my friend, the banker."

The Masked Rider was straining his ears for a sound of hoofbeats in the night. The powerful stallion, Midnight, drawing upon all of his marvelous speed, had swiftly outdistanced Blue Hawk and the sheriff's posse. But the riders should arrive at any minute now.

Robards was still toying with the reedlike instrument. Boyd sat slumped dejectedly in his chair, his face gray and slack with defeat.

Momentarily, the cabin was quiet.

"Yuh've lost, all right, Robards," the Masked Rider clipped. "Neither of yuh'll ever take an ounce of gold out of Blackjack Malone's mine, the Lily Belle!"

Robards' eyes gleamed behind his thick-lensed glasses.

"Still another mistake, eh, my friend? I suspected that Wayne Morgan's second visit to my humble cabin was not so friendly and harmless as he pretended. I suspected that it was made with the definite idea of spying and prowling. I later regretted not having killed him on the spot. It is now evident that he discovered the ore samples in the drawer in the next room."

"That's right. He took one of the samples, and later showed it to me. I immediately recognized it as rich, high-grade ore. Later, when I visited the Lily Belle, although I saw only low-grade ore, I realized that this rich specimen had come from the abandoned mine. I realized, as you did, Robards, that the Lily Belle, instead of bein' worthless, actually contained a fortune in high-grade ore."

Robards nodded.

"You are even shrewder than I thought, Masked Rider. I see that you are possessed of considerable knowledge pertaining to many subjects. As I am. We might have been kindred souls."

"I'd as soon be kin to a rattlesnake!" the black-garbed man said harshly. "Yuh'll hang, Robards. The sheriff'll be here any minute, and I'll turn you two over to him."

"I hate to see an intelligent man die, Masked Rider!" Robards said gently.

Casually he had lifted the reedlike object to his lips, pointed directly at the Masked Rider. There was a sharp, hissing sound. A slender, shiny object leaped from the mouth of the peculiar instrument.

Almost too late, the Masked Rider realized that that polished, harmless-looking piece was a blow-gun, that the shiny, sliverlike thing slashing across the room toward him was a poison dart!

He flung himself desperately to one side, knowing that if this slender dart scratched his flesh a quick and horrible death was certain. He heard the wasplike hiss of the object as it ripped the air an inch from his cheek, heard its clatter as it struck the wall and fell to the floor.

His wild leap to elude that slashing death had carried him to his knees. Momentarily, he was off-balance.

HE SAW Robards lunge to his feet, saw his hand dart with unbelievable quickness up under his vividly colored jacket. Now the gaunt man's mask of mildness and kindliness had left him. A wolfish snarl distorted his thin features, his eyes blazed with maniacal cruelty and hate.

Still with incredible speed, his hand flashed from under the jacket, lashed backward and forward, and a long-bladed knife bored straight at the Masked Rider's heart.

Again the black-clad man lunged desperately aside, knowing that he had never met a more deadly adversary than Clayton Robards. He landed sprawled on hands and knees, fell forward, and fired from that position.

Robards staggered, whirled half about by the close-range bullet, and snarled like an enraged dog.

Harvey Boyd, his cloak of defeat dropping from him, had leaped to his feet at the first movement from Robards. Now the banker seized the heavy chair he had been sitting in, lifted it with amazing ease and flung it at the Masked Rider. The masked man took the chair across his shoulders. Numbing pain shot through his powerful body, but he flung the chair aside and fired at the banker deliberately.

Boyd reeled backward, struck the wall, recoiled, and stood there swaying on wide-spread legs.

Robards had taken full advantage of this momentary diversion. The *sumpitan*—the Malay blow-gun—had failed, as had the keen-bladed knife. But Robards was not beaten. He knew that unless he killed the Masked Rider he was doomed.

Robards whirled, leaped toward an enormous, murderous-looking spear. On the masked man's two previous visits to this cabin of death in the rôle of Wayne Morgan, he had noticed the weapon hanging in a rack on the wall. The gleaming spear was six feet in length, and razor-tipped.

Still snarling his fury, Robards seized the murderous weapon, swung back his arm to hurl it at the masked man. But the spear never left his hand.

Thunder from the Masked Man's twin guns beat back from the cabin walls like the roll of giant drums. Robards' gaunt body seemed to break in the middle, and he slumped slowly forward to the floor across the huge spear.

The Masked Rider whirled. But Harvey

Boyd was out of the fight. He sat on the floor, his back against the wall, clutching at his side with fingers through which blood slowly dripped. The banker was badly wounded, and knew it.

There was a wild clatter of hoofs outside as the sheriff's posse arrived. Blue Hawk was the first man to leap through the doorway, rifle in hand.

"Senor!" he exclaimed anxiously. "Are you all right?"

"All right, Hawk," the masked man said grimly. "But it was one of the narrowest escapes I ever had!"

Sheriff Paris, followed by Blackjack and Nick Malone and the other possemen, crowded into the room. They looked in amazement about the smoke-filled room. . . .

A short time later the Masked Rider graphically recounted the steps which had led up to the exposure of Robards and Boyd.

"Clayton Robards was the real leader of the gang that's been raidin' Sapphire Valley," he said. "Boyd was only an accomplice." Briefly he told how he had come to suspect them, and how his reasoning had proved to be true. As he finished, he added, "Now yuh know most of the story. Robards is dead and can't talk. But mebbe Boyd would like to add the missin' pieces." He looked questioningly at the dazed and wounded banker.

"I—I suppose I might as well," Boyd mumbled hoarsely. "I think I'm going to die, but if I don't I'm doomed anyway. Yes, Robards was the real leader. I had to go along with him because he knew I used to be an outlaw many years ago. Somehow he'd learned that I got the money to start the Silver Bow in an express car robbery.

"He—he was a devil out of Hades if there ever was one. He pretended to hate violence, but inflicting pain and suffering was to him like food and drink to other men. He was the real owner of the several ranches I've had to foreclose on because his raids had forced the owners to the wall."

BOYD looked with what might have been regret at the grim-faced Blackjack Malone.

"Blackjack," he said, "I know it wouldn't help any to say I'm sorry about my part in this. Don't hate me too much."

"I can't hate a dyin' man, Harvey," Blackjack said levelly, and turned away.

"It—wasn't the Broken Bell Robards wanted," Boyd went on. "He wanted that deserted old mine on it, because he'd accidently discovered a big pocket of rich, high-grade ore in it. He said it contained a fortune, and he knew—so I guess you're pretty well fixed after all, Blackjack. It was Robards' idea to force Blackjack to the wall by killin' his cattle, so he would have to come to the bank for a loan.

"That's just what happened. That mortgage I hold on the Broken Bell falls due a week from now. Robards figured that, with Blackjack dead, there wouldn't be a chance of the note bein' paid off by the time it fell due. Blackjack shouldn't have any trouble raisin' all the money he needs now, though—thanks to the Masked Rider!"

"And that gun-fannin' cowboy, Wayne Morgan," Blackjack exclaimed. "By ding, whatever became of him?"

"He's probably drifted on to a new range," the black-garbed man said, smiling. "I've heard he's powerful fiddle-footed."

"Seems like I misjudged that hombre the same as I did you, Masked Rider," Sheriff Paris said warmly. "I reckon all them tales I heard about yuh bein' a badman and killer was a pack of lies, after all. And the next hombre I hear say such gets socked on the jaw!"

"Thanks, Sheriff." Still smiling, the Robin Hood rider asked, "By the way, Sheriff, does that twenty-four truce still hold?"

"It shore does—longer if yuh want it!"

"Then I reckon Hawk and me'll be ridin'. This range ought to be a plumb peaceable place after this."

Blue Hawk had been standing silently near the doorway ,and now the Yaqui turned and slipped out into the night. The masked man followed him to the door, turned and lifted his hand.

In his deep tones, he said, "*Adios,* friends!" then his black-clad figure also vanished silently into the shadows. A moment later the listeners inside the cabin heard the receding hoofbeats of two horses. Then there was deep silence, fitting harbinger of the peaceful, prosperous days that were ahead for Sapphire Valley.

But on other ranges crime and death were in the saddle. Troubled men were calling, raising their voices against injustice and intolerance.

The tall, dark-clad rider mounted on the great black stallion and his faithful Yaqui trail-mate, Blue Hawk, rode on through the night, ready as always to answer that call.

The buck whirled and ran

DEER RUN

By ROGER FULLER

A veteran of the Pacific goes hunting in Texas

THE steel gray of the Texas dusk was deepening and Casey knew that it lacked only a few minutes of the time when it would be too dark to get a deer, even if one did come down the dry wash beside which he crouched.

"One whole blasted week!" he told himself. "And not even a glimpse of anything that looked like a deer!"

Tomorrow, he had to be back to the ranch. He'd have to go back to those fellows whom he had mentally promised venison steaks and chops. He'd have to go back empty-handed, and that was going to be tough.

He had set his heart on bringing back some meat to Hacky and Chuck and Red. He had fought with them in the Pacific and they were closer to him than any men he ever had known. After their discharge, they all had pooled their money and had bought a small spread in Texas, just west of the Pecos.

They had let Casey into the deal only because they liked him. Too many wrong tosses to the dice, too many trips to the fellows who sold raisin jack out on the edge of the bush; too many good times at Pearl, on the way back, had brought Casey home with only enough money to make a token offering in the ranch venture. He had been reluctant to take the share they had offered him, but they had insisted.

He had pledged himself to make it up to his three friends, somehow. In some special way. And the opening of the deer season had offered the opportunity. A saddle of venison could act as an expression of how he felt about the way Chuck, Red and Hacky had treated him.

It shouldn't be too hard, he decided. Before he went into the Army, Casey had always killed his share of deer. He had an uncanny way of finding runs that led down from the ridges, along the beds of streams, or through lonely willow thickets. He could read the cloven-hoofed mark of a pawing deer and tell whether a herd or a single buck had passed. He could tell stories from bruised twigs and the spots where an antlered buck had paused to listen with quivering ears or to browse on tender green growth near water.

"Take a week off," Red suggested, the day before the deer season opened. "You been beatin' your brains out here at the ranch. You're working yourself to death. Go on a huntin' trip like you was always talkin' about overseas. Go shoot an antelope or somethin'."

SO CASEY had gone to the place where there *always* were deer to be found if

men knew how to hunt them. It was a region of winding creeks that stretched along the gentle slopes of hills, streams where trout could be caught if one knew how. This land was owned by other ranchers who cared not how much he wandered here in search of game. They were well aware that Casey was a returned veteran and viewed his activities and restlessness with the broad tolerance which has always been characteristic of the Great Southwest.

One of the first things Casey had done, since leaving the Army Separation Center, had been to write for hunting and fishing privileges. And this was the deer season!

There *had* to be deer coming through this place, Casey told himself, desperately. The fog of dust, which had pestered him during the other days he had hunted, was gone. Now, on his last evening, there was clear cool weather that should get the deer moving. There was a smell of fall in the air, too, and that was as it should be. If there was going to be a Norther, the deer would know it and come down from the ridges to feed along the streams before they sought the impenetrable prickly pear to wait out the storm.

Yeah, the deer would be moving tonight, he thought, but they'd better start moving soon. Casey had a few choice, clipped, bitter words for the man who would jacklight a deer.

"Come on, big buck," he breathed. "Come on down here to Poppa. Red and Chuck and Hacky are going to get some meat. I've gotta take 'em some venison to make things up to them."

As if in answer to his demand, there was a rustle in the bush behind him. Casey slipped off the safety of his shotgun, breathing quickly. He knew the sound.

It was a deer, and it was coming down the run. He was going to be able to bring venison back to the boys, after all.

The buck stepped out from behind a screening thicket and stood there. Its tail waggled as it looked around. Casey brought the gun up to his shoulder.

It was the perfect shot—the kind of shot most men never are given to see, except on calendars. The buck was twenty feet away. The front sight of Casey's rifle was on that tawny shoulder, just back of the front leg.

Okay, Casey. Squeeze the trigger now and the big buck will go over on his side, kicking at the brush that could offer him no shelter now, and you'll have a big hunk of meat. You can go back to Chuck and Red and Hacky with a deer and, with the gift of venison, make up a little of what you owe them. Let him have it, Casey!

Kill him . . . .

Yeah, kill him. How many Japs had said that to themselves when they thought they had him in their sights? Yankee, you die, they had screamed in their senseless *banzai* charges.

Kill him! Kill them! Kill them all! Kill everybody! Kill everything!

He lowered the gun slowly, so carefully that the buck took no warning from the motion. Casey looked down at the weapon that had killed so many deer and, he had thought, was going to kill so many more. Out in the Pacific, when the boys were batting the breeze, he had told them of the deer he was going to get, once he was back in the States.

But now he knew that this gun in his hands never would kill another deer, or anything else. He had seen too much killing. He had killed and others had tried to kill him. Being a hunter or the hunted, he thought now, were bum occupations for a man.

Sure, he wanted to bring venison back to the boys. He wanted to tell them, that way, how much he had appreciated what they had done for him. But he had seen too much killing and there would have to be some other way to show his gratitude.

He stood up and his sudden motion whirled the buck around. The two of them looked at each other for a brief moment, hunter and hunted, killer and victim. The buck *whuffed* through his flaring nostrils and stamped at the ground with an impatient motion of one sharp hoof. The animal was undecided about this apparition that had risen from the shadows to stand there, not moving, in front of him. The buck shook his antlered head.

"Geddouttahere!" Casey roared. "Get the hell outta here before I change my mind!"

THE buck whirled, and was gone. Casey watched the deer's flag flashing through the trees until the gloom closed down. Then he turned slowly up the trail, toward the road where his car was parked.

He was wondering what Red and Hacky and Chuck would say when he came back, empty-handed.

"You sucker," he told himself, bitterly. "You oughta be ashamed of yourself."

But he wasn't. Somehow, he knew, he never would be.

GUN TRAIL to SALT WEED

By BILL ANSON

A range-wise ranny fights to set the record straight on Sam Dodd, Army deserter!

Jim Carpenter

JIM CARPENTER'S orders were to bring Sam Dodd back alive—if possible!

First, he had to make certain Dodd was the soldier who had deserted a small Montana fort just before a Sioux raid. Ten years of search for Dodd had elapsed. Now the deserter was said to be a wealthy Wyoming rancher, vaguely connected with the notorious Hole-in-the-Wall outlaws.

"We'll make an example of Dodd," the provost marshal at Fort Abraham Lincoln told his tall, tow-headed agent. "Women and children died in that Indian raid. The rotten part is that Dodd was a second lieutenant. For all we know, he might have had a hand in getting guns to Sitting Bull before Custer was wiped out."

"My best ruse is to pose as a cattle buyer, until I get all the information about him," Captain Jim Carpenter said. "Sam Dodd is not an uncommon name. It was an anonymous letter that told us where to find him. I don't trust it too much. Could be some hombre who's got a grudge against Dodd."

"Be careful," the provost marshal warned. "Dodd was an expert with a .44. He always made trouble. An Injun squaw cut him up once. Look for a scar across his shoulder-blade where her knife almost got him."

The river boat landed Carpenter at Ogallala, where he took the stage up the Oregon Trail along the North Platte to Fort Laramie. There he bought a big black cayuse with a deep chest and a wicked eye. As he rode out of the thriving fort town, Carpenter looked like money in his dove-gray Stetson, silk shirt and horsehide jacket, frontier pants, and half boots. A new .45 caliber Peacemaker was suspended low from his right hip, the holster bottom tied to his thigh whang string.

Three days later, just before sunset struck its sky fires, Carpenter trotted into Salt Weed, a booming frontier post not far below the Big Horn foothills. Ranch rigs were tooling through the rutted mainfare, and punchers crowded the plank walks. The false-fronted stores, liveries, express office, and post office were too busy to close.

"I doubt if yuh'll get a room in the hotel," the stableman told the government agent. "Yuh might have to sleep on a pool table. New grazing has been thrown open round here. Plenty of Texas cattle comin' in. I'd say yuh was sellin' goods, or buyin' stock?"

"Cattle," Carpenter replied briefly. "Making a survey for my company."

HE LOOKED important and he acted with dignity, which was the reason he obtained the last room in the big log hotel on the main street. Tipping the spectacled clerk a twenty-dollar bill, Carpenter asked him to spread the word around that he wanted to talk with ranchers about stock they would have ready for the autumn market.

"That's easy," the clerk said, grinning. "All I've got to do is holler out the front door an' the range bosses will come runnin'. There's new breeds comin' in. Ranchers want to get rid of old stuff. It'll be a buyer's market this year, pardner."

Jim Carpenter shaved and donned a clean shirt before going to the Salt Weed Hash House for supper. He sat by himself at a corner table, and it wasn't long before a tall, hawk-faced man with a spiked mustache came up and offered a handshake.

"My name's Bert Smiley," the rancher said. "I heard yuh was gettin' a line on market herds. Yuh might come out and look over the Arrowhead about forty mile west of town. I got five hundred head I'll sell cheap, and the sooner the better."

"Why so?" Carpenter inquired easily.

"Rustlin'," Bert Smiley snapped. "Herds are movin' up toward Montana, and a lot of crooks don't mind takin' along extra stock. I want to cut my herd down to blooded breeders and save gun-fightin' wages."

"My company is only making a survey now," Carpenter said carefully, "but if we could pick up stock cheap, we might consider it. Yet to drive to market now when critters are just fattening up—" He shook his head. "Of course, if we got a real big herd, it might be different."

The government agent was empowered to buy stock, for it could be disposed of on Indian reservations and at Army forts. So Jim Carpenter was telling no falsehood.

"I know other ranchers who'll be glad to sell off stock," Smiley said excitedly.

"Who?"

"Why, there's Jack Orr of the Triangle Bell, Nicholas Sweet of the Wagonwheel, Sam Dodd of the Pothook, and some smaller fry. We could make up a real big herd and supply punchers to drive it, if you paid them."

"Any of those ranchers in town now?" Carpenter asked.

"I'll get them here by tomorrow night," Smiley promised.

After Bert Smiley left the restaurant, Carpenter wandered down the plank sidewalk to the town's noisiest place of amusement. There were several faro tables going in the Big Horn Bar. Punchers crowded the brass rail, and three bartenders worked feverishly. In the corner of the smoke-thick hall a piano and violin swung into a dance tune.

Stone-faced, silent, Carpenter stood behind a crowd watching a poker table where several rugged looking men were playing stud. Piles of gold pieces were at the elbows of the players. There was no drinking. Apparently these men had been here long and meant business. They were not ranchers. They were obviously long riders who swung wide loops in Wyoming and Montana—perhaps members of the Hole-in-the-Wall gang.

One of the players, a skeleton-faced man with a completely bald head, suddenly lifted chill gray eyes, to sweep the bystanders, his eyes coming to rest on Jim Carpenter. Recognition was mutual and immediate. Carpenter's instinct was to duck back, but he was too tall to lose himself in the crowd about the table. He had to stand there, while the skeleton-faced hombre's lips curled in a wicked grin.

This man was "Skelly" Carlin, whom Carpenter had sent to Federal prison not three years before, after the theft of a pack train of Army supplies headed for General Custer. Carpenter had taken Skelly in a tough fight in a canyon. The prisoner was not the only member of the band of thieves, so he had been sent up for but two years. It certainly hadn't purified his life, judging from his presence with the Hole-in-the-Wall outfit.

With a sinking feeling, Carpenter turned and walked away from the poker table. Luck was against him. His act as a cattle buyer in Salt Weed was fated for a brief end, and it would certainly do the Army no good. Once the cattlemen discovered he was a bluff, they might run him out of town. Carpenter had to find Sam Dodd quickly and strip the shirt off the renegade's back.

"Mr. Carpenter, I believe," said a voice at the government man's elbow, where a youngish hombre in ten-gallon hat and chaps appeared. "I'd like to buy yuh a drink. My name is Sam Dodd, and I was just talkin' to Bert Smiley of the Arrowhead."

CARPENTER halted short, his dark eyes studying the lean, sharp features of the speaker. This Sam Dodd was young enough

to have been an officer in the cavalry three years ago. His nose had once been broken and was poorly mended, giving him a slightly tough appearance, yet that could have happened since deserting. He weighed what he should, about one hundred and seventy pounds, and he had dark hair and dark eyes.

"Let me buy the drinks, Mr. Dodd," Carpenter said coolly. "I hadn't expected to see you until tomorrow night."

They walked over to a vacant table in a far corner and sat down. Sam Dodd shouted at a distant waiter, who went for a bottle and glasses.

"Bert Smiley says yuh might buy if yuh can get a big enough herd from us ranchers, Mr. Carpenter," Dodd began, smiling affably. "I could let yuh have almost a thousand head cheap."

"When could I look them over?" the government man asked quickly.

"Tomorrow if yuh like."

"Could we ride out tonight?" Carpenter asked, casting a glance as if for the waiter, but noting that the poker game across the hall was breaking up.

"Jut as yuh like," Dodd replied. "But it's thirty miles, and perhaps a rest after the trail today would be better."

"No, I could see the stock first thing in the morning, then come back to town to meet the other ranchers," Carpenter said. "Here's the waiter. Let's drink up and hit the trail."

"Yuh're quick on the trigger, Mr. Carpenter," Dodd remarked, hastily reaching for his pocketbook. "But the refreshment is on me."

Carpenter saw that Skelly Carlin and the Hole-in-the-Wall outfit were already passing out the doors of the barroom. Odd they had decamped so swiftly. Their game had apparently gone on for long, but now they weren't even tarrying for a bar drink.

"You pay for one and I'll catch the last one for the ride," Carpenter said to Dodd, for he didn't want to run into Skelly Carlin at the hitch-rail outside.

When Carpenter and Dodd left the Big Horn Bar, Skelly Carlin and his pards were nowhere to be seen in the lights about the hitch-rail. Dodd picked up his bronc. Then he and the government man walked down the street, the one horse trailing, until they reached the livery. There Carpenter rented a fresh bronc for the ride to the Pothook.

As they mounted at the livery, Carpenter's eyes were upon Sam Dodd, who placed both hands on the pommel, reins tucked into one hand, and then swung low and quick over the saddle cantle—like a cavalryman. They spurred their broncs to a trot. There was no mistaking Dodd's seat in the saddle. Though he didn't post, for he was forking a cowboy saddle, still he sat upright and slightly forward.

At the foot of the main street, Carpenter tried his first trick.

"Column right!" the government man barked.

Immediately Sam Dodd pulled his bronc to the right, and then stopped the move.

"No, we ride straight out," Dodd warned. "You must have been in the Army. Yuh sounded just like—" Dodd broke off short, staring hard at Carpenter.

"Were you ever in the cavalry, Mr. Dodd?" the government man asked casually. "My father was a West Pointer, and I suppose I got a lot of drilling as a kid."

"I see," Sam Dodd said, and he glanced nervously over his shoulder. "I fought for the South. Yuh couldn't tell it from my speech, but I was born in Missouri from Northern parents. My sympathies were with the South, but that is forgotten now."

"An officer?" Carpenter asked, as they began a lope over the dark trail.

"Yes, a lieutenant."

Carpenter's right arm was on the off side of the two horses. He let his hand drop unseen to loosen the Colt in its holster. But he couldn't be too certain yet that Sam Dodd was the man he wanted. There was still that little matter of the scar on the man's shoulder-blade.

Their broncs slowed pace to a plodding walk at the foot of a low hill where the brush grew close to the trail. The moonlight reflected full in the faces of the riders. Sam Dodd was silent, evidently thinking about his forthcoming cattle sale. And perhaps this cattle had been stolen by the Hole-in-the-Wall gang from Texas herds coming to Wyoming and Montana. That would be the connection between the tough poker players and Sam Dodd.

But why had they left the Big Horn Bar so suddenly?

Then, suddenly it came to Carpenter that his life was in danger. Skelly had recognized him as a government agent. The outlaw would try to protect Sam Dodd. It was now or never for Jim Carpenter to take his prisoner. Somewhere along this road the government man might meet his death.

HE DREW bridle rein with his left hand, his right snapping to his six-gun butt. At the same time, Carpenter heard a rustle in the brush at the top of the hill. The moonlight flashed on a rifle barrel. Carpenter's six-gun did not swing at Sam Dodd. It crashed red streaks toward the ambusher up the trail. But not before the rifle had exploded.

There was a howl of anguish from Sam Dodd, who dived from the saddle. Dodd had been hit. Evidently by mistake. Carpenter swung his bronc to the brush, shooting again at the flaming rifle. And he heard a scream of pain. Then Carpenter leaped from the saddle, flung himself low, and reloaded.

"They got me!" Sam Dodd groaned. "They saw us comin'. They've been waitin' for a good chance for months."

With a reloaded weapon in one hand, Carpenter crawled beside the stricken Dodd and took the man's weapon. Then he darted out to the road and ran for all he was worth toward the ambush party. He was too late. He heard horses moving away in the night.

Carpenter came back to Sam Dodd and dragged the man out to the road. There the government man ripped off the Pothook owner's shirt. He struck a match, as if to see the wound, but he let the flame first strike Sam Dodd's back.

There was no knife scar!

"Fooled me plenty!" Carpenter snapped. "But I've learned something."

"Get me to my ranch," Sam Dodd groaned. "Don't take me back to Salt Weed. I've got enemies. Take me home. I'm goin' to faint."

The next evening, Jim Carpenter rode from the Pothook ranch into Salt Weed alone. He turned the bronc over to the livery, then walked to the hash house for his dinner. There was a tightness about his eyes and lips. He was sitting alone at a big corner table when Bert Smiley came in with two other men in chaps and big hats.

Smiley fingered the ends of his mustache as he came forward.

"Good evening, Mr. Carpenter," he greeted. "I rounded up Jack Orr and Nic Sweet. Dodd told me last night he'd be along for the meetin'. He said he'd pass the word to some small fry, but we're the ones to do any real big business with. Should we wait or join yuh here?"

Jim Carpenter shook hands with the grizzled Jack Orr and the bald Nic Sweet.

"Sit down, gentlemen," the government man invited. "I saw Sam Dodd last night. We can talk now."

"What did Dodd say?" Smiley asked quickly. "Is he going to sell?"

Jim Carpenter took some blank cards from his pocket and three pencils.

"That all depends about Dodd," the government man said. "Now, you three write down how much stock you have, the brands, and what you want. I'd also like to know how many punchers you could lend me for the drive."

Orr and Sweet reached for the cards, but Bert Smiley looked at Carpenter quizzically.

"What about Dodd?" he asked. "Yuh know that he's grazing government land out there, don't yuh, Mr. Carpenter? He leases it from Washington. If he lets go of a lot of stock, he might not be able to hold on to the land, and it would be thrown open to other ranchers."

Carpenter took a sip of coffee.

"That's right," said the government man. "He's grazing government land on lease, and he could get into trouble and lose everything. But cutting down his herd wouldn't make much difference. Even if he was to die, his heirs would hold the lease. We cattle buyers must take all that into consideration, Mr. Smiley. Do you care to make out your bid?"

With a scowl, Smiley picked up the pencil and wrote on the blank card.

Carpenter took the cards and studied them. Then he reached into his pocket and drew out a piece of paper. He compared the cards with the paper—which was the anonymous letter received by the provost marshal at Fort Abraham Lincoln. It was the letter which told that an Army deserter by the name of Sam Dodd could be found in Salt Weed. Carpenter was shielding the letter with his hand, so that the men at the table couldn't identify it.

The government man put the cards and letter into his pocket, then shoved back his chair from the table.

"I'll accept the bids of Sam Dodd, of the Pothook, and Jack Orr of the Triangle Bell, and Nicholas Sweet of the Wagonwheel," he said. "I don't mind telling you now that I work for the U.S. Government. In fact, I'm Captain Carpenter, of the provost marshal's office. You knew that, didn't you?" Carpenter turned to ask Bert Smiley, whose face was twisted with rage.

"How did I know it?" Smiley demanded, shoving back his chair. "And what do yuh mean by turnin' down my bid?"

"Because you are the man who wrote that anonymous letter about Sam Dodd," Carpenter replied. "The writing you did on the card compares with the writing on the letter that I just looked at. You figured to get rid of Sam Dodd, and then you would jump his lease of grazing land."

The government man's eyes did not waver from Smiley's face.

"No doubt it was you who tried to murder Dodd last night on the road to his ranch," he continued then, "but he'll recover. You were not shooting at me. You wanted Dodd to die under arrest by the provost marshal's office. Then his heirs wouldn't get his grazing rights. When Skelly Carlin and the Hole-in-the-Wall riders left the barroom, they set the bushwhack trap."

"You're loco!" Smiley shouted, springing to his feet. "Sam Dodd deserted the Army. It's the same name."

Jim Carpenter got to his feet slowly.

"That's what Skelly Carlin told you," he said. "He ought to know. He gets Army information from deserters. And you, Smiley, are in cahoots with the Hole-in-the-Wall. I sneaked onto your range last night and found cattle with Texas brands—stolen from the trail herds on the way to Montana. You're a low-lived, rustling crook, Smiley, and I've got a hunch that when I rip the shirt off your back, I'll find what I'm looking for."

Smiley jumped as if stung by a rattler at those last words. Then, without warning, his hand slapped down to the butt of his low-slung .44 caliber six-gun.

But Jim Carpenter was just ahead of the man with the spiked mustache. Carpenter's right finger flipped his Peacemaker from holster by the trigger guard. The weapon twirled into his hand, and Carpenter's thumb caught the .45's hammer and let it drop.

The government man's slug hurled Smiley clear across the restaurant and into the front wall, where he fell in a shuddering heap, his weapon dropping to the floor unfired.

Carpenter stepped forward, bent over the dead man, then ripped Smiley's shirt down the back. A long knife scar was revealed across the shoulder-blades, the scar that had been left there by a squaw's knife.

"Strange that the man who changed his name from Sam Dodd to Bert Smiley should run into another man called Sam Dodd," Carpenter mused. "But I told the provost marshal the name was not uncommon—and that I'd better get my information correct first."

Robbed of ten years' savings and his fancy saddle, cowboy Rod Carver rides right into a nest of owlhoots and battles against odds for the restoration of his property—and the triumph of justice—in

GUNS OF RATTLER GULCH

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As shots boomed, Ace crossed the creek and struck

An Exciting Novelet

DAWN ON THE

CHAPTER I

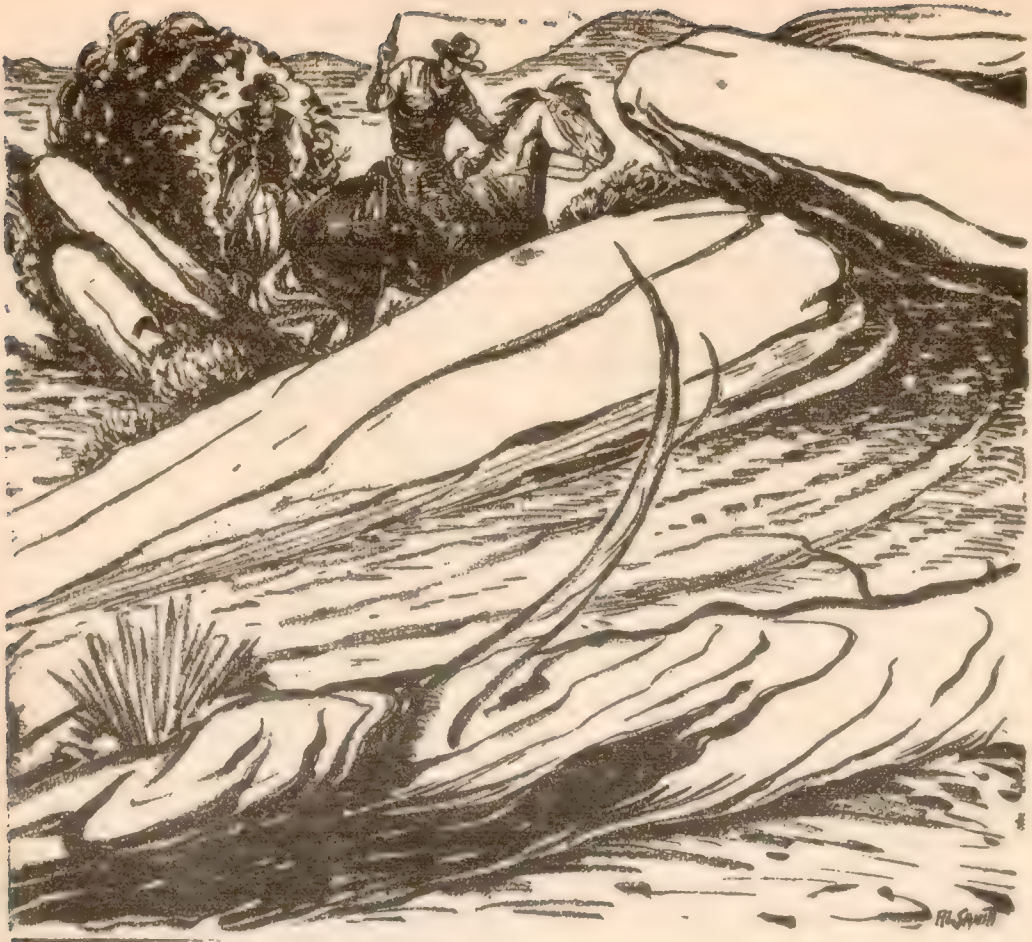
Range War

AT THE precise moment a flushed sage hen startled his horse, a shot blasted the quiet of the Mesa country. Ace Barfield baled out of the saddle, as his horse sunfished and swerved. He landed lightly on the ground, his right hand full of six-gun.

That shot was a warning to Ace that he had ridden to within range of the siege guns which menaced his brother King and the waddies of the Diamond B who were holed up at the ranch.

Ace caught up his horse, a bald-faced bay, and led him on toward a narrow cleft in the

When a Deadly Feud Rages, Ace Barfield Uses



flom turf trail, his horse handicapped by a damaged leg

HORIZON

By
HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

tortuous home trail—a trail through which Ace would have to run a red gauntlet of threat and danger while carrying fresh ammunition and supplies to his besieged brother and friends. Most important of the supplies, were the medical goods.

"Suck in a long breath and get goin', Nick," Ace called softly to the bay. "From here on in the goin' 'll be tougher. Next time yuh get scared, shy like a hoss and not like a strikin' sidewinder."

Ace now stuck a foot in the nigh side stirrup and was half swung over when his hat was chopped from his head. A rifle shot whanged. Nick lunged, stumbled and fell heavily on his off side among treacherous loose rock rubble. Ace dived clear, unhurt save for a slight scalp abrasion.

All His Gun Savvy to Settle the Grim Fracas!

He dropped to his knees and breathed hard for a moment. His horse groaned, and Ace knew stock well enough to know that when a critter groans or moans, its pain is severe.

Under cover, Ace made a swift examination of the bay, his favorite mount, and discovered that the horse's off foreleg was broken in two places.

"Nick—pardner—"

The tough young waddie's voice broke.

Nick represented a good slice of the history of Ace's young life, the history of many a hot but impromptu bucking contest, the history of many a roundup and trail herd work. Nick had also bridged a romantic phase of Ace's life, for Ace had first gentled Nick for Tess Waine to ride.

The ironic part of this embittering disaster was that he felt sure one of the Waine hands had fired the bullets intended to kill him, but which had instead brought about the necessity for shooting Nick.

Lips firmed, Ace drew his gun and fired two quick shots. Nick's end was swift—a mercy killing by the rider who loved him.

A half sob shook Ace Barfield. In his mind there was fanned a furious flame for vengeance. Back at the ranch he had left his dad, old Ace Barfield, at the point of death. A Waine slug, from a bushwhacking, was lodged in old Ace's back dangerously close to the spine. He was in dire need of medical supplies.

NOW, more than ever, Ace was more determined to get the supplies back to the Diamond B. But he realized that from this point on in, he must advance with the craft of a Comanche scout. He would be handicapped under a load weighing in the neighborhood of eighty-five pounds.

In a patch of junipers, at a higher level, Ace lowered his pack and was about to return to Nick to strip off the saddle and cache it here when a sudden movement to the northeast arrested his attention. His hand closed over his gun butt.

Below him in a pasture hemmed in by rugged hills, a number of cattle grazed. That pastureage was rightfully the grazing land of the Diamond B, but the Waine Bar W outfit had annexed it. What made Ace the more bitter was the sight of Tess Waine in the act of mounting a smart little paint horse. She was laughing with two cowhands.

As Tess swung in the saddle, she blew a kiss to the men and headed her pinto up the top trail.

Rapidly she drew closer and Ace could not control the increased beat of his heart. Tess Waine was a lovely girl and also a beautiful rider. He watched her toss her russet curls from her face and heard her humming a carefree song of the open range—a song he had often sung with her before her Uncle Jake and his riders had gone on the prod for Diamond B range and scalps.

As she rounded a bend and fetched up at the junipers, Ace stepped out. Tess was screened now from the men below.

"Ace!"

"Yeah, afoot, too, or mebbe yuh knew all about that," Ace snapped back. "Nice job yuh've gotten, ridin' herd on a bunch of drygulchers. Reckon, like a boss gunman, yuh're ridin' back to check the scene of the latest crime, huh?"

The girl's face blanched, then swiftly turned a light crimson. Her pretty mouth curled with disdain.

"Like your father and your brother King, you've been eating loco weed," she answered. "You've all gone mad—your dad with his faked deeds to range he never did own—your brother with his attempts to get our foreman, Herb Evans. And now you, with this cock-and-bull story. But your schemes haven't worked, and you can go back to the Diamond B and tell that old mossy-horn, your dad, that the Waine guns aren't fooling."

A strange dry chuckle came involuntarily from Ace. He stepped forward and laid a hand on a rein. There was a fierce flame in his eyes—under whose glance Tess quickly averted her own.

"A long and purty speech, Tess," he drawled. "Herb Evans and his gunslingers has shore choused up yore uncle and you. Yuh figger yuh know the whole story, so mebbe yuh can tell me who nearly murdered me a few minutes ago. Yep, mebbe yuh can figger out who it was shot and caused Nick to stumble and break a leg, so I had to shoot him. Shore—Nickie."

Ace forced her to look into his smouldering eyes. Her mouth quivered. But he had no intention of sparing her feelings.

"I'd be glad to carry yore message back to Dad," he went on. "Only, yuh see, a Waine drygulcher got Dad in the back. He was on his way over to see yore uncle—goin' to try to prove he had deeds to certain rangeland under dispute. Dad was goin' to offer Jake a

com-compromise. Mebbeso Herb Evans could tell yuh more of the story. One day we'll be squeezin' it out of him, word by word. Now follow me, an' I'll show yuh some of the Waine work."

Ace led off and Tess found herself kneeing her bronc on in his tracks. At the spot where Nick lay, there was no need for Ace to point. Tess reined in her horse sharply.

"Nickie—Nickie!"

Her vioce was scarcely audible. A mist almost shut the dead form of Nick from her view—Nick once the mischievous two-year-old who had more than once piled her, then muzzled her later as if in apology.

"Shore, that's yore Nickie," Ace said bitterly. "Only difference between him and Dad is, Nick died a merciful, quick death. Dad's lyin' in terrible suff'rin'. Now!"

Ace spun belligerently.

"Get back and tell yore Uncle Jake a story from me. Tell him an' Herb Evans and Herb's Mexican knifeman that King and I and the boys are standin' pat. I've got fresh ammunition in my pack up at the junipers." Ace's eyes narrowed to twin slits. "Tell 'em," he added, "that because of Dad and Nick here, we aim to bring judgment down— a terrible form of judgment."

TESS was having trouble attempting to trap her fluttering underlip. Suddenly her form stiffened proudly and she exhaled a long breath as she seemed to recover her calm.

"I take it your father's been shot," she said crisply. "The work of some rustler and you're trying to pin it on to one of our boys. I distinctly heard Uncle Jake instruct Herb Evans not to resort to gunplay unless in absolute defense. This drygulching is the work of some Black Hole owlhooter. Bushwhacking isn't the Waine method, Ace Barfield."

Ace grinned mirthlessly. He turned abruptly and set about unsaddling. Somehow, he intended to get his load back to the Diamond B. It would be a great stimulus to King and the boys to see him back, even though he staggered in under the load afoot.

With the medicine and bandages and other medicaments he carried in his pack, he had hopes for his dad. Ammunition was important, but not as important as medical aid and good food for old Ace.

Ace rolled, slid, stumbled and crawled along to the lower levels, his pack a heavy dragging weight on his shoulders. He was not used to this sort of work. But he continued doggedly onward. At times he was forced to lie prone when danger threatened and, in those moments, he took time out to review the events which had led up to this flaming feud between the Bar W and the Diamond B.

He knew his father was in the right—having deeds to lands he claimed—range and water. Ace wondered just why it was Jake Waine was suddenly so stubborn.

Ace moved on, squirming through a thicket. Suddenly, he froze. He could faintly hear Tess Waine's voice. She was back at the far end of the canyon meadow talking to her men.

Ace raised himself. A sharp gasp escaped him. Grazing with the Bar W whitefaces were a number of his father's prize imported breeder stock, red polled stock which under no circumstances could have gotten here of their own volition.

But never had the Barfields suspected the Waines of rustling. Old Jake, Ace thought, was as stubborn as a Gila monster, but he wouldn't toss a wide loop. Yet—here was evidence! Red polled stock, more than a hundred head of them.

Ace was of two minds. He pondered the question of drawing his gun and smoking out those two Waine riders. He figured Tess Waine would surely see justification for his action. She would undoubtedly know that with a herd of stock as valuable as this blue blood stock there could be no possibility of mavericks. But Ace's better judgment prevailed.

"Yuh'd better pull in yore horns an' mosey on," he mumbled to himself. "Gettin' this ammunition and supplies back is the most important job yuh got."

He was humping his pack to his shoulders when a piece of dry windfall cracked at his back. He spun, and awkwardly attempted to leap to one side, groping for his gun, but a quivering knife blade, flicking like a snake's tongue, slit his right forearm and cut across his ribs sector.

Ace dropped to his knees, shucked his pack. He bit back an urge to groan with pain as he reached for his gun, grounded by the impact of the knife, but a heavy boot heel struck his wounded arm. Ace whirled and dived, his arms about the legs of his attacker. They crashed together and Ace managed to drive a soggy left hand hook to the other man's face.

CHAPTER II

In Enemy Hands

IN SHEER desperation, Ace Barfield fought with the ferocity of a wounded cougar. He matched blows and holds with a tall Mexican who was as supple as a boa-constrictor. Ace was weakening from loss of blood and was unable to avoid a sudden lightning hold, when his legs were trapped from behind, and a strong arm clamped about his throat.

He could tell by the sibilant breathing of his attacker that the man would kill him if he had to.

But Ace was still game.

Momentarily he relaxed, then suddenly, in a last desperate move, he hurled himself backward, striking hard with his head into the other man's jaw. Both leg and strangle hold relaxed.

Ace crawled away, feeling about and hoping to recover his gun, but his senses suddenly forsook him. He slumped into unconsciousness.

When Ace came to, he found his ankles and wrists securely tied with pigging strings. A tourniquet had been roughly applied to his arm and his rib wound had been tied up.

He recognized his attacker and captor as Felipe, a suave Mexican friend of Herb Evans. Felipe for months had been a mystery man in the Black Mesa country. He obviously was a man of some culture in his own land—handsome, carrying the brand of a professional gambler. Men at the Diamond B called him the "Don."

Now he forced a smile through his battered lips as he smoked a cigarette.

"*Lo siento,* senor. I—am so sorry, but," he shrugged, "*nos falta*—we must!"

"Meanin' you and Herb Evans, huh?" Ace drawled back. "Okay, you win for right now, and I suppose yore boss Evans'd rather have me in on the hoof than any other member of the Diamond B. But what goes on from here?"

Felipe showed two rows of gleaming white teeth. He stamped out his cigarette butt.

'You un'erstan' well, Senor Barfeel'," he said. "Soon as the Senorita Waine leave, you are to be taken to the line-camp shack. No doubt Senor Evans will then tell you what remain' to be tol'. Now I would advise no foolishness unless you would like to feel this leetle *crin corbata.* You sabe what I mean, senor?"

Ace knew very well that Felipe was speaking of the garotting fine horsehair lariat he had about his waist.

"If again I 'ave to fight you, senor," Felipe went on, "Caramba! I do not inten' to get 'urt. I will—keel you!"

He moved in to check the canyon pasture ahead.

"Ah, *si,* she is gone," he said. Then he tightened his lips and sent out a shrill whistled signal. Ace realized that he was calling in the two riders.

His conjecture was right, for shortly two riders pulled their horses to a skidding halt.

Ace Barfield recognized them as Yuma Dakin, an hombre who had once worked for the Diamond B, and Arizona, an owlhooter if there ever was one.

"Yuh shore mussed him up enough," Yuma observed, nodding down at Ace, and Ace was quick to note a flash of resentment in Yuma's eyes.

"Orders was to soft-rope him, or his brother King. Had to use the knife, huh?" Yuma glared in challenge at Felipe with narrowed eyes.

"*Si,* Senor Yuma." The Mexican took a step toward Yuma. "I 'ad to use the knife, but you will no-tice that at least I got heem. Quien—"

"Shore, shore—cut the jabber," Yuma interrupted. "Blamefool business anyhow. If'n Herb thinks we can buffalo the whole of the Diamond B because we got the young Ace of Diamonds captured, I can tell him he's crazy as a hoot owl."

Yuma and Felipe eyed each other in a little side act which did Ace no harm. There was some friction evident, and Ace saddled a faint hope to it.

"Reckon Herb'll want him toted up to the line-camp, huh?" Yuma asked.

"*Si,* senor. You an' the so sweet Arizona here. It is good, as I see, that you 'ave added more red poll stock to our—the whiteface 'erd. Senor Evans will be ver' please."

Felipe stooped, recovered his knife, wiping it carefully. Then suddenly it flashed in his hand, and disappeared in an amazing movement of wrist that brought Yuma's lower jaw down.

The Mexican smiled and bowed, then turned and strode off into the thicket.

DUSK'S soft ashes were beginning to sift down on the rugged line camp zone as Ace was lowered from the saddle at the cabin. Yuma began barking orders at Arizona immediately.

"Yuh can rustle up chuck while I 'tend the stock," he said. "The Don'll be in touch with Evans and get someone else to ride herd in the canyon range. We'll be here for the night."

"Shore," Arizona grunted, as he stuffed his cheek with tobacco. "But I cain't say I'm likin' the hand Herb's playin'. Part of it's all right—the playin' off of old Jake Waine against old man Barfield. That was all in the day's work. It give us time to make the gather of the red cattle. But this kidnapin' business—wal, it begins to smell bad!"

"Better stuff a yucca root in yore mouth along with that tobacco, Arizona." Yuma snarled back. "Evans hired us to do a job of work. 'Twasn't old man Waine hired us. He only pays us our money. If'n Herb figgers on owlhootin' Jake out of the Bar W, with the gal thrown in for good measure, that's not our business. If you, Arizona, can dodge the law in any other better place and, at the same time, draw down good dinero, then hightail pronto. Now help me indoors with Barfield, then get supper on."

Ace was dumped on to a small cowhide bunk and secured to its framework. Dakin cautioned him to lie low and not to attempt to try to get free.

"Our orders is to hold yuh alive, feller," Yuma said with emphasis. "But nat'rally, if'n yuh turn ornery, yuh'll get plumb busted all to pieces."

"Fair enough, Yuma," Ace replied. "I ain't tryin' anythin'. But yuh'd better fix this arm. The danged tour'quet is drummin' clear up to my brains and the cuts should be washed out. Kind of foolish for Evans to think he can play me off ag'in the Waine gal, huh? I had a meetin' with her this afternoon and—well—it wasn't what yuh'd call a—uh—love fest.

"Let me tell you hombres this—the Waines started throwin' lead, this feudin' ag'in us, and no matter what happens to me, I'm only one of the string. There'll be a lot of Bar W hides on the fence before King and the boys are through and mebbe yourn'll be along with them. Yuh—"

"Shut up!" Yuma cracked Ace sharply across the mouth with the side of a hand. "Yuh ain't in no place where yuh can shoot off yore mouth. Anyhow, yuh ain't started to see Evans show his hand. We've just been pickin' at the edges. Wait till Herb has old Jake under his thumb proper. Then he'll bust wide open. Now I'll go get some spring water and wash out them cuts. Got some turps in my saddle bag. That'll sting a mite."

Yuma grinned evilly and moved on out of doors with a water bucket.

With Yuma out of the way, Ace's mind toyed with the conversation of Arizona and Yuma. There had been some hint that Evans' scheme included putting old Jake Waine out of the way. Evans, Ace knew, had always been a slippery-elm sort of a man, but he had shown considerable efficiency as foreman of the Bar W.

Ace screwed up his forehead and suddenly his eyes sharpened as if he'd found a solution. Evans had dealt his cards with the craft of a fox and old man Waine had played right into his hand.

"Tess!" Ace could not restrain the mention of her name. Evans had been too clever for her. He had poisoned her mind almost perfectly against the Barfields and their cause and rights. Tess was convinced, Ace was sure, that old Ace Barfield and his sons had done her Uncle Jake a grave wrong—that the Waine methods of counterattack were fully justified.

The entrance of Arizona with some greasewood kindling broke up Ace's musing. Ace stirred, attempting to turn over on his left side.

"I'd appreciate it if yuh could bring me a drink of water, Arizona," he said weakly. He knew that shortly Yuma would be back with water, but he had a plan to test out Arizona.

"Huh!" Arizona spun sharply.

"It seemed to me, listenin' in a while back, that from the way yuh talked up to Yuma, yore heart ain't settin' any too well in this double dealin' business Evans has mapped out," Ace went on.

ARIZONA spat sharply into the dust of the clay floor.

"Money ain't everythin', Arizona," Ace continued. "Shucks, if it was money yuh want more'n anythin', the Diamond B can pay bigger checks. The State of Arizona right now is short on organized law, but what they is, is dead ag'in drygulchin' an' kidnapin'.

"Mebbe yuh don't rightly see it, Arizona,

but yuh're playin' smack into the marshal's pocket. When Evans is all set to hightail with the gather, you, Pete Fallon, Yuma an' the whole gang of sheriff-dodgin' gunfighters will be left holdin' the bag and yuh can take it from me, yuh'll think the bag's full uh wildcats!"

Arizona was silent a long moment. He touched a lighted match to the kindling, cleared his throat, then turned to eye Ace in the gathering dusk.

"I—uh—kin take care of myself, feller," he croaked. "Mebbeso I ain't too well favored by this here business, but I ain't talkin' too much. For yore own sake, keep yore face shut. When the proper time comes, I don't incline to be left holdin' no bag for nobody. *Sabe?*"

Ace nodded. He licked his parched lips and felt his pulse quicken. He had found another faint glimmer of hope in Arizona's words, but he dismissed the thought, realizing he couldn't trust this grizzled old owl-hooter too far.

The throbbing of his temples was like the ominous roll of drums of doom—foreboding, booming in his brain. He thought of Tess and tried to visualize her back at the Bar W, reporting her meeting with Ace. Suddenly Ace started as he realized that the way matters were jelling Tess, too, was to become part of Evans' gather of Bar W assets. . . .

Ace was not far out in his picture of Tess's whereabouts. She sat sewing, but from the corner of an eye she was watching Herb Evans in whispered conversation with Felipe. Felipe was making a report, giving Evans a sketch of events through puffed lips. Tess started now and then at the mention of Ace's name.

"Line camp—Yuma and Arizona—"

She caught this and other snatches of conversation which seemed to revolve around some grim scheme. She started to her feet, her lips parting, but Evans rose and came toward her.

"I'm taking a little ride, Tess," he said, smiling. "How would yuh like to ride out with me to the line camp? Felipe tells me Ace Barfield met with a little—uh—accident. Yuma and Arizona picked him up and packed him to the shack. Evidently, he was tryin' his hand at rustlin' some of our canyon stock. Of course, there's no need for you to go, but I thought yuh'd like some proof of what the Barfields are really doin' to us. I think we can induce Ace to talk some."

Tess's eyes half closed, as if she were pondering some weighty problem. Suddenly she tossed her head and nodded.

She had recalled that, when last she had seen Ace Barfield, he was afoot and in no position to attempt the rustling of stock.

"Very well," she said coldly. "Perhaps I had better see for myself. There's a chance that, between us, we might convince Ace that he and his kinfolk are in the wrong and through him arrange some sort of compromise that will end this terrible feud. I'll be ready in a moment."

After she had left the room, Evans swung around and spoke rapidly to Felipe in an undertone.

"It's workin' out fine," Evans said. "Get up there quickly and stir up trouble. I'll light a match and when yuh see the signal, you know what to do. I want Ace Barfield, a smokin' gun in his hand, found by Tess and I'm not particular who pays the price—Yuma or Arizona." Evans shrugged. "You understand?"

Felipe smiled knowingly and bowed.

"*Si,* senor, perfec'ly."

He moved swiftly out of doors to catch up his horse.

CHAPTER III

Tess' Ultimatum

HERB EVANS and Tess rode on along the north trail, now and then their knees touching as the trail narrowed into a sharp defile. A lazy half moon sprayed weird shadow shapes across their trail.

Tess shuddered as a horned owl "croo-hoo-ed" his deathly hunting cries. But as she tossed her hair back in characteristic defiant manner, she told herself that she was much too otherwise disturbed to let these shadow shapes and nature's goblins frighten her.

Grave suspicion had opened her mind wide tonight. She had, of late, begun to wonder about her Uncle Jake's condition. He had seemed so ill, so childish at times. On occasions he was his old swashbuckling, buckaroo self, but at other times she had to baby him.

She was afraid that Jake had turned far too much over to Herb Evans, but she was without complete understanding.

"Nice night, Tess." Evans remarked.

"Ah, yes, Herb, lovely."

"Ever thought any more about my—uh—about our marriage?" He turned toward her and she gazed steadily into his face. In the past she had admired his calm coolness and his efficiency as a manager.

"While there is so much trouble afoot, Herb," she said, "I scarcely think we have a right to discuss such matters. I would dislike the thought of settling in the Black Mesa country when there was ever haunting me—blood, on every moon. Let us get things settled and then—and then—"

A shudder ran through her lovely form. She had nothing further to say for a strange suspicion of Herb Evans had clutched at her heart tonight. In fact, subconsciously it had been there ever since her meeting with Ace Barfield that afternoon.

Evans crowded his horse closer and placed a hand on one of hers.

"We're getting things ironed out, Tess," he said softly. "That's my reason for asking yuh to come up to see Barfield. You and Ace used to be pretty thick friends, if not sweethearts. You can do more than fire and lead. Yuh've noticed how yore uncle is slippin' under the strain. Pretty soon, Tess, yuh'll have to take over. I'll stay on for a reasonable time."

Suddenly he pulled his horse to a halt and swung in his saddle so that he was very close to the girl.

"But yuh see, Tess, there are other calls on my time," he said. "I could stay only on one condition. If anything was to happen to Jake, and you needed me, I'd remain here as—uh—yore husband. Don't you understand? Well, that's it, Tess darling. Think it over, but don't take too long because Felipe, a man with strange Spanish intuition, seems to feel that there is something in the wind."

Evans deftly knotted his reins about the saddle horn and caught her into his arms. He drew her closer and pressed his lips to hers. She offered no resistance, but her mouth was cold—as cold, almost, as death. At last, slowly she drew back.

"We—we must ride on, Herb," she said falteringly. "Herb! What's that you're doing?"

Evans had lighted a match and, holding it in his cupped hands, was giving the prearranged signal to Felipe.

"Uh—oh! Pete Fallon's line-ridin' and I'm flashing a signal, Tess. And it might be as well for you if you didn't do any night ridin'. You never know—yuh might be caught out in a storm. Or yuh might easily run into—"

He was cut off short. Two muffled gunshots sounded.

"Trouble at the cabin!" Evans boomed. "Yuma, or Arizona—or both—have bungled things."

Eyes wide in the darkness, as if she probed her mind for even a glimmer of a solution to the stark mystery that bothered her, Tess Waine heeled her horse into a run after Evans' roan.

Tess reached the cabin as Evans opened the door. She carried an automatic herself. A smoking hurricane lantern gave the dingy one-roomed cabin a fitful, eerie light. Looking over Evans' right shoulder she glimpsed a bedraggled, bloodstained form sitting on the lone bunk, a smoking gun in his hand.

"Ace Barfield!"

Her cry was involuntary.

Then, she gasped. Stretched on the floor lay Yuma Dakin, his head in a pool of sticky, dark, bloodied mud.

Evans moved in, covering Ace. Tess, terrified as she was, followed. Then she glimpsed Felipe, in a corner of the cabin, standing by Arizona, a knife menacing Arizona's ribs.

ACE BARFIELD looked up at the girl, a snarl on his lips.

"So—yuh're part of the stacked deck?" he drawled bitterly. "Take a good look around and check up on the layout. Yuh spoke of the Barfield outfit all eatin' loco weed." A dry chuckle escaped him. "Just like an amateur stock show I saw down to Dallas once—so rank it was worse'n anything I ever had seen. The worst of this is, I fell for it!"

Tess shot a swift glance at Evans, a questioning glance, but he slowly holstered his gun and nonchallantly rolled a cigarette.

Ace's eyes rekindled their flame. He could see right into the jaws of the trap now. Felipe had come up for the sole purpose of casting Ace in the role of a killer, a little drama calculated to convince Tess Waine. Yuma was dead. There was no doubt on that score. But he was dead from a bullet in the back of his skull and the fatal shot had been fired by Felipe, while Ace—his hands temporarily released, as part of the fake show and with a gun placed within his grasp—had fired at Arizona, who was about to threaten him.

"Blank ammunition!" Ace had convinced himself. "An act specially staged for Tess, and like a dumb porcupine, I fell right into the play."

He tossed his useless forty-four from him, and relaxed flat on his back, waiting for the next act, to be prompted, he had no doubt, by Evans. But as he waited, he glanced at Tess, whose pale face plainly displayed her concern.

Ace felt he could really read her every emotion. Tess Waine, he was sure, had begun to catch on to a new slant on things. Her nostrils, however, suddenly flared, as she caught his glance.

"So!" she cried. "This afternoon, you squealed about the wrongs the Waines were passing out your way—wrongs done the Barfields. And here, what do I find? It is as obvious as Uncle Jake and I were led to believe. Given the slightest opportunity, you and your kindred, Ace Barfield, would kill at the drop of the hat. In fact, this time, I have caught up with you. You have killed—a Waine man."

A strange smile twisted Ace's mouth.

"Go on—go on," he prompted caustically. "Yuh plumb amuse me. My hands are, for some reason I can't figger, unhitched by Felipe who has come up, so he says, to 'tend my wounds—wounds he made with his throwin' knife. He has planted a gun close enough for me to reach. Then, sucker that I am, when Arizona seems to make a play for me with his gun, I fire at Arizona with—with blank cartridges, and—jumpin' jingo—Yuma falls dead."

Ace broke off with a strange chuckle that disturbed Tess Waine. Her eyes were half closed, and for a moment Ace thought she was going to faint. Herb Evans stepped back and slipped an arm about her, and Ace had the urge to leap from his bunk and drive both fists to Evans' leering face. But he subsided again. Tess was taking care of herself. She withdrew from Evans' embrace.

Now Evans began to talk in whispers to Tess, but Ace could not catch a word of the conversation. He watched Tess's face move as if by changing emotions. Then suddenly she nodded. She turned to Ace.

For an instant she gazed steadily into his eyes, her own flashing, as if trying to make Ace read and understand some silent message.

"Murder has been committed, Ace Barfield," she said with slow deliberation. "The evidence seems very strong against you, but of course, as Herb says, you could plead not guilty—self-defense. We're open to give you a chance. Here is Herb's idea. . . ."

Tess paused again as Ace stirred. There was more play in her eyes which intrigued him.

"We would like the Diamond B outfit to withdraw their stock on their easterly range up into Munson's Canyon range, as my uncle always desired, and leave all range east of the creek for Bar W grazing. Your promise that this will be done will win you your freedom. You'll have to convince your hot-headed brother and your father that there is no sense in continuing this feud. You'll also have to convince them that they cannot win."

TESS was through. Ace watched her swallow convulsively and his heart beat faster than ever. He was beginning to see clearly Evans' scheme—a well-planned stratagem against the Diamond B and the Bar W. A very clever scheme, if allowed to work.

Ace smiled queerly.

"And if I was to forget my manners an' tell yuh all to go to the devil—what then?" he suddenly clipped.

Tess winced sharply. She tossed a lone vagrant curl from her forehead as if stung by Ace's words.

"Then there's nothing for it but to do as Herb suggests. You'll be turned over to the Sheriff of Black Mesa. The men would start you on the jail trail tonight. You know, short of supplies and ammunition as your kinfolk are, they won't stand a chance against us. Well, that's our proposition, Ace. Think it over."

She turned, and nodded to Felipe, who toyed with a set of pigging strings.

"You'd better tie him up until he reaches a decision," she ordered. "That is Herb's idea, isn't that so, Herb?"

She swung about to face Evans, who gave a perceptible start. This reaction caused Ace to reach a swift decision. There was something fishy about the whole set-up, but he was going to take a chance. He would acquiesce, accept Tess's ultimatum. Unless he was loco, something in her eyes as they looked at him and flashed at Evans, told him she had other plans and set a new line of thought working in Ace's mind.

"They'll be no need to tie me up," he said. "I'll carry yore proposition to King and try to make him see things my way."

He shot Tess a significant glance and the girl nodded.

"Yuh fixed a time limit on when we have to clear our stock to Munson's Canyon?" Ace asked.

It was Evans who answered.

"Thirty-six hours from now," he said. "We'll have scouts on the job, and if so much as a Diamond B hat shows east of the creek after that time, we'll smoke yuh all out. That clear?"

"Mighty clear."

Ace got to his feet. He swayed uncertainly a moment, then he turned to Tess.

"It's all right if I mosey on now, ma'am?" he asked.

She nodded and turned away as Ace passed her. Evans flashed a glance at Felipe. The Mexican made a sign with the fingers of his right hand, a movement which warned the girl that a new danger menaced Ace Barfield.

"I think I'll catch some fresh air till you're ready to return, Herb," she said, moving out of doors.

CHAPTER IV

Clouds of War

VERY quickly Ace Barfield realized he was in no condition for a hike those eight miles to the Diamond B. His wounds pained him, but never had he been more determined to make good. He hadn't trusted Herb Evans' ultimatum delivered by Tess who, he was certain now, had tried to get across a message to him.

He paused and reflected. In his weakened condition he might have mistaken Tess's eye play. Was it possible that she was convinced of Evans' treachery?

Ace shrugged and slid along a fringe of nearby cottonwoods. A horse had snorted at the corral and this gave Ace an idea.

As he fetched up at the corral, he flipped a bridle from a saddle horn on the top pole. There would be no time to saddle a horse. If he could make it at all, he'd have to go bareback.

He called softly to a rangy roan, Yuma's horse.

"Ain't goin' to hurt yuh, feller," he said in husky tones. "Just do me a good turn an' I'll pension yuh off on alfalfa an' all the oats yuh want at the Diamond B."

He touched the roan's muzzle and slowly slipped the bit in the horse's mouth.

Then Ace led his mount to the pole gate and let down one end of three poles.

He led the horse out, almost to the cottonwoods. It was going to be an effort to mount, for his sore ribs gave him a lot of pain.

He was crouched, to leap, when suddenly he heard Tess Waine scream his name:

"Ace!"

A shot crashed, but Tess's warning had given Ace a chance. With the gunfire the horse had lunged at the brush. Now Ace jumped after the roan and caught up the trailing reins. This crisis which had not wholly surprised him gave him new strength. As the horse started into motion, Ace swung up.

Sharp stabs of flame lanced from a gun muzzle. Ace ducked low on the horse's neck and dug in his heels. The sibilant whine of lead and its crash through the brush warned him that more than one gun was in ambush action.

"Stretch yore legs, feller," he called to the roan.

He was streaking for a second patch of cottonwoods when a Winchester spanged. His horse stumbled, but recovered. Ace clung like a leech. Lead was whistling by and it was very obvious to Ace now that Evans had never intended he should reach the Diamond B. The Bar W's foreman, with his ultimatum delivered by Tess, had just staged a badly plotted act in an effort to impress the girl.

A slug tore through the shoulder of Ace's shirt on the off side. As he cleared the scrub and struck an open meadow, his heart pounded for he realized that no fast-action, good rifleman could possibly miss him in the open, moonlighted plain.

He raised his head a bit to reconnoiter the meadow's end where he must cut out to the creek trail to the Diamond B. He gasped as a shadowy shape loomed before him. His horse seemed to have developed a decided limp.

As Ace ducked low again, he was taut for the next trick fate might have had in waiting. He cleared the meadow and suddenly swung erect as he saw a maverick steer go crashing into the brakes.

"Steady, pardner," he called brokenly to the roan. "That critter shore jolted my nerves. Now ease up some. Purty soon we might have to start flyin' ag'in—if we hear

hoofbeats. Reckon yun got grazed by one of those slugs. Sorry, feller."

Ace stroked the horse's lathered neck.

He walked his horse until they reached the creek. The roan was calmed down by this time. By now Ace realized that Tess Waine had warned him of treachery. She must have seen through Herb Evans' plan to ruin her uncle and to clean out the Bar W stock. Ace smiled grimly. He was thinking of the Diamond B stock, too. Herb Evans was all set for a runout with a very valuable trail herd of whitefaces and red polls as his gather.

BUT TESS! Evans wouldn't lightly forgive her for having screamed that warning to Ace.

He pulled his horse to a halt, swung half round exhaling a long, broken breath, but he realized that, for the moment, he was powerless to do anything about this new problem—the safety of Tess and her uncle.

He was determined, however, to make the problem a major part of his and King's action when they came out fighting.

"Got to get to the ranch pronto," he told himself.

Suddenly he dug his heels into the roan's flanks. The sound of drumming hoofs had come to his ears.

"Lift 'em, feller," he called. "This is it! Now into the water, and we'll ride the rimrock trail."

At a low bank, Ace urged his horse into a creek, backtracked downstream a hundred yards or so, then climbed the roan up into the broken rimrock.

He rode slowly on, alert, but hopeful. Sooner or later, he would have to leave the top trail, but he figured by that time, Evans' gunfighters would not have ventured that close to the Diamond B.

The moon was lowering and the whole grim area had resolved itself into a zone of deathly fantastic ghost shapes, as Ace started in toward the creek again.

The crossing was effected clumsily by the roan which was making heavy going now on a damaged leg.

They struck the firm turf trail when suddenly two shots blasted. The horse lunged. A Winchester boomed. The horse had broken into a full gallop, but had only covered about forty rods of the eighty rods distance to the Diamond B gate, when he crumpled, piling Ace in a high arc.

Ace struck a soft claybank which broke his fall. He recovered and half turned to look at the horse. The roan was down, struggling but helpless.

"I'll be back for yuh, feller," Ace called softly. He ducked and lumbered on toward the gate. He was about to crawl under the lower wire to the right of the gate, when the form of a man stepped out of the shadows and shoved a gun muzzle at him.

Ace tried to call out, but his strength failed him. He pitched to his face and lay still.

A few hours later, Ace Barfield was eating a fresh roasted beef rib as King, his brother, threw a barrage of questions at him. Ace had already given him a fairly full account of the afternoon and evening's happenings.

"I can't figger it out that old Jake Waine has let Evans cold deck him like yuh say, Ace," King boomed.

Before Ace had a chance to answer, a tall old wrangler entered the living room. This was Juniper Matthews, the hombre who'd challenged him at the gate. Ace had asked Matthews to examine the roan horse for the extent of its injury.

"Well, Juniper, what did yuh find?" Ace asked.

"Not hurt bad, Ace. He was on his feet. A bad sprain, I think. Mebbeso a little scratch. But we'll take care of him."

Ace smiled and turned to his brother again.

"Well, King, I knowed all along my story'd sound crazy, but it ain't crazy. Old Jake's been a purty level-headed mossyhorn ever since we've known him—right until this uprisin'. I told yuh I saw polled stock in with the Bar W whitefaces. Yuh know, I know, and Dad knows that Jake Waine would never throw a wide loop. I'm shore Dad and Jake could have ironed the differences out if—if Dad had had a chance to see Jake. Is this beginnin' to make sense?"

King nodded to his brother.

"I know yuh're tired and hungry, kid, but go on," King said. "Yuh're shore Evans' askin' yuh to come here to convince me was a trap to drygulch yuh right from the start?"

"Shucks, yes. Didn't I already say that I could tell the way Tess talked and the way she looked, she was tryin' to warn me."

FOR a moment Ace stopped speaking and eating. His eyes had narrowed and were staring into space. He was thinking of Tess, and of a plan to attempt to rescue her and her uncle from further danger at Evans' hands. Soon he looked up at his brother.

"This feelin' I got ain't just a hunch, King," he said. "It's something deeper. With my escape, the plot has blown wide open. Evans is fixin' to run off a big batch of stock, all he can lay his hands on, and that wolf Felipe is in cahoots. But that ain't all. Before he starts his trail herd north, he'll make a run on the Diamond B."

"Yeah? Then yuh got any ideas what we should do? We're plumb low on ammunition."

King Barfield got to his feet, his huge, six-foot frame seeming to dwarf Ace, who was no stripling himself.

"We'll have to cut our outfit into two parties, King. Shore as anything, Evans will send men up here to burn us out. He'll also smoke up the Bar W. He's after a clean sweep. I'd advise riding out as one big party, until we hear sign of Bar W raiders ridin' in on the Diamond B. Half our boys will turn, cross the creek, follow 'em and shoot 'em to pieces."

"What'll the other half of our boys be doin'?" King cut in.

"Ridin' down on the Bar W, King. Old Jake Waine'll be there in trouble. Sound all right?"

King Barfield drew the back of a hand across his mouth and a faint smile then played with his thin lips. He laid a hand gently on Ace's shoulder.

"Shore, pardner," he said softly. "Now I got news for yuh I didn't like to spring on yuh till yuh was feelin' better. Dad passed along tonight. He called yore name before he went—first words he spoke in nearly two days. Now he's dead."

Ace Barfield's head dropped on to his good arm on the table top. Lips compressed, his brother King watched him. Juniper Matthews shook his head and looked up at the new big boss of the Diamond B.

"The kid's idee is sound, King," he intoned. "What orders for me?"

"Yuh'll lead the Bar W party, Juniper," King replied. "Take charge of Rusty, Statton, Price and Wallater. I'll have Nevada, Summers, Rymer and Joe with me. Remember, if it comes to shootin', as I figger it will, we're short of ammunition."

"Shore. And if'n we're in time to—well, if old Jake is alive at the Bar W, we're to treat him friendly like?"

"That's it. That's Ace's idea."

Ace raised his head. His eyes were red-rimmed and he batted his lashes a moment as he got to his feet.

"I didn't hear my name mentioned in the scheme of things," he said. "But mebbeso that's just as well. I've got my own plan to carry out."

"Yuh're in no shape to even think of tryin' to bulldog a gopher," King drawled. "Better hang tight here with Willie Wong, the cook. Might be interestin' at that."

But a strange hard light danced in Ace's steely blue eyes. King Barfield knew that he might as well stop talking. Ace had a job of his own to do and he would go through with it in spite of any arguments to the contrary.

"Better have Willie strap up them ribs and yore arm, then," he advised. "And—" he held out his hand "—good huntin' pardner. Yuh got a tough job ahead, but I'd hate like the devil to be lookin' into the wrong end of yore Colt tonight."

Ace took his brother's hand in his left hand, and squeezed it warmly.

"Luck to yuh, pardner. It's you and me from here on in!"

They moved out to gather their forces. Ace selected a black mare, one of his father's remuda and rode out of the gate at the head of Juniper Matthews' forces. He would keep to the rimrock trail for a few miles, and then—

Ace squeezed the butt of his left hand gun grimly. His trail would strike off at a tangent to the south, and he hoped his hunch was a true one.

His father was dead! Judgment must be carried out.

CHAPTER V

Singing Lead

THEY had ridden a few miles without misadventure when suddenly Ace pulled his mare to a halt. Juniper rode up alongside.

"What is it, Ace?" the oldster asked.

"Cattle, Juniper. Listen! Yuh can hear them crossin' at the ford. Herb Evans' gather is movin' north to assemble some place."

For a moment Ace was stumped. Here was a new complication which was calculated to disrupt his original plans.

"Mebbeso I miscalculated some, Juniper,"

he said. "I shore figgered Evans would come ridin' in to smoke the Diamond B before he started his rustled herd north—that he would use the raid to cover up the sounds of the herd movin' out."

"Perhaps yuh ain't figgered too far wrong, Ace," Juniper replied. "Evans ain't just rustlin' out the canyon range stock, like yuh said yuh seen. He must be figgerin' to round up a bigger herd up north like yuh said. I wouldn't chuck yore hunch out the window. I'll send Rusty back to warn King, huh?"

"Do that. Ask him to send Nevada up. He and Rusty can trail those longloopers better'n anyone else."

Shortly Rusty and Nevada returned, and Ace gave them instructions.

"No gunplay," he warned. "Just keep 'em spotted. Yuh'll likely find only a couple of riders. Later, if ever'thin' turns out as we figger, we'll be in and take charge."

In due course the sound of cattle crossing the creek ceased. Ace listened for the hoofbeats of some slinking backtrail scout riding the rimrock, but all was locally quiet and Ace signaled to Juniper to ride on.

At a point three miles beyond the line camp cabin, Ace drew his horse to a halt. He swung around in the saddle.

"Hear it?" he called to Juniper. "Like a drum roll. It's Bar W riders along the creek trail, just as I said. Get along now. Yuh'll have plenty of time. But if yuh suspect anythin' bad, speed 'er up, Juniper. Luck!"

Ace turned out and thrust his mare down into the creek and across.

He struck deep into the cottonwoods, but was no longer scary of the possibility of an ambush by an Evans' scout. Evans would have every man he had in action. This was the night the hellions of Herb Evans went all out. The stakes were high and Evans was gambling with all his blue chips. Ace hoped that Diamond B ammunition would last through.

* * * * *

A faint light winking from the dirty window of the small cabin set Ace's heart pounding. He dismounted and led his horse to cover. He hitched the black to a sapling, then catfooted on in to the cabin's south wall, where he halted, hugging the logs near the door which was open an inch.

He had heard voices. He edged to the door and listened. To his amazement, it was Felipe talking—talking to Tess Waine. Felipe! Where was Evans!

"Wan leetle word from you, senorita and, poof, Senor Evans go out, like dat! I keel heem for you. I 'ave position in my country. I am beeg agent for cattle which I am to buy from the Bar W. Ah, you wonder why I play in so well wit' Senor Evans! I can be in much favor wit' my compadres when I return wit the cattle, an' you, senorita, you could become the fairest donna in the country."

"Felipe! Take your hands off me. I trust you less than I trust Evans, killer that he is. I would rather die than—"

Here Tess' voice was smothered. This gave Ace Barfield his cue. Like a gust of a sudden Chinook wind, he thrust the door in and leaped, his left gun fisted.

Felipe was on his knees beside the bunk to which Tess was secured. His arms were about the girl's shoulders, his puffy lips hard against her mouth. But like a streak of forked lightning he spun, his right hand flying to his knife. Ace leaped nimbly to one side. The deadly throwing knife was scarcely half out of its sheath when Ace fired. Felipe sagged slowly and slumped grotesquely to the clay floor.

A low, broken cry escaped Tess. But not until he was sure Felipe was dead did Ace move in.

Tess's lovely eyes were dilated but never had Ace seen her look more lovely. Her face was pale, her lips quivering with emotion.

"Ace—darling!" she gasped. "I've been so wrong, so fooled. I somehow knew you'd make the Diamond B. Oh, Ace!"

ACE dragged Felipe's body clear and quickly freed Tess. He placed an arm about her and helped her to sit up.

"Tess, honey, where's—where's Evans?" Tess started, as if disappointed that Ace hadn't kissed her.

"Tell me now," he urged.

"He rode off to see uncle," she replied and was forced to catch her underlip in her teeth to stifle a sob. "He claimed he was going to force Uncle to come here, Ace, to make Uncle sign over the Bar W as part of a crazy scheme to force me to marry him and to save me and Uncle Jake.

"Evans is a killer, Ace. I'm afraid for Uncle Jake. I'm convinced that through Felipe, Herb has been doping Uncle. He's acted like a child at times. That is what first wakened my suspicions of Evans. And when

he schemed to set you free tonight, I quickly caught on it was a plan to get you out of the way. You understood, didn't you, Ace?"

Ace nodded, smiling.

"Yore horse still here, Tess?" he asked.

"I guess so."

Tess swung her legs over the bunk.

Ace told her some of the Diamond B boys were on their way to the Bar W.

"But we can beat them to the ranch," he added. "Somehow, I think yore uncle might need help quickly. If yuh feel fit enough, let's get started. Better take Felipe's gun. It's a thirty-eight—not too heavy for yuh."

"Ace, you're grand!"

Tess kissed him on the cheek and followed him to the door and out into the dark night.

Ace longed to take her into his arms, but there was no time. He had no idea what danger would threaten at the Bar W. His mind was cluttered with thoughts. He wondered about King and the boys, perhaps desperately fighting in defense of the Diamond B—short-handed, and short of ammunition as they were.

Mounting their horses, Ace and Tess rode on toward the Bar W.

Flames leaped skywards at the Bar W.

"Yore hay's goin' up!" Ace called out. "Looks like the Evans' gang have begun the final act, honey."

They reached the ranch-yard and quickly dismounted. There was a light blinking from a lone window, though all windows were brilliantly illuminated by the hay fire.

On the veranda, Ace cautioned Tess to stand by.

"I might need help," he whispered. "Cover me an' shoot if yuh have to. Don't ask no questions."

"Be careful, Ace," the girl replied. "And remember, everything in the future depends on you."

Ace squeezed her arm, firmed a grip on his Colt's and gently thrust in the door.

A board in the wide hall creaked and Ace froze. Now he moved on. He halted as he heard mumbling. He placed his ear to the door of the Waine living room, but heard only the one voice—the mumbling voice of old man Waine.

Slowly he pushed in the door. Old Jake Waine sat at his desk-table, fumbling with papers. He looked terribly old, and feeble. At Ace's entrance, he showed no sign of alarm or surprise.

Ace moved in, holstering his gun. He drew up close to the old ranch neighbor, filled with a great measure of pity for old Jake.

He dropped to a knee beside the doddering old rancher. Suddenly, Jake Waine whirled, snatching his old Colt from an open drawer. Ace reeled back, but not quickly enough to avoid a glancing blow from the gun barrel.

Ace dropped to the floor, shaking his head as a wave of dizziness threatened to put him out, but Jake Waine was talking. This revived Ace, but he decided to play possum.

"So-o—y'see, Herb Evans, I been foxin' yuh a bit—stallin', gatherin' strength to pistol-whup yuh. My sight failin' as it did, ever since you an' Felipe started doctorin' me with that last medicine, suspicioned me ag'in yuh."

Ace started. Tess had been right.

"Yuh figgered on me deedin' the place over, so's yuh could force Tess to marry yuh, but I've done signed everythin' over to—to her. Good gosh! Where *is* Tess?"

THE old man attemped to get to his feet. He clutched the table and forced himself partly erect.

"Goin' to find Tess now," he said brokenly. Got to find—Tess. I—"

"Sit down!"

Ace almost shut off his breathing at the sharp sound of Evans' voice. He hadn't heard Evans pussyfoot up along the hall. In the half light he could see Evans had a gun in his hand. Ace's temples throbbed in his moment of great tension.

Jake Waine dropped to his chair, his graying face a picture of terror, surprise and shock.

"Why, uh—I thought I'd find Tess."

"Quit gabbin'!" Evans walked in close to the table. "I reckoned mebbe the fire in the hay corral would speed you up with the signing of those papers. Now let's have them—all signed. Or die!"

Ace Barfield's nerves grew taut. Evans was less than ten feet from him, the large table separating them and screening Ace in the half shadows. He tightened his grip on his gun. Now old man Waine was talking again.

"Yuh—horn toad, Evans," he mumbled shakily. "I've knowed I was passin' along for some time. Yuh've fooled me and Tess concernin' the Diamond B folk, and I reckon you and Felipe has all the Bar W stock out on the Border trail already— The papers are signed, but they're made over to Tess. If I

could get to my feet ag'in, I'd—I'd pistol-whup yuh."

Evans leaped in.

"Talking of pistol-whupping, here's a sample of how it's done by a man who is on his feet." He raised his gun and was curving his arm down in a deadly arc when suddenly fingers clutched one of his legs above the ankle and jerked.

Evans sprawled on his face, but with possession of his gun, he rolled, shooting. Ace Barfield felt flame singe his face. He leaped to his feet and to one side as Evans twisted again and fired.

Like a streak Ace raised his weapon and shot Evans' gun from his hand. The Bar W segundo yelled. He hung uncertainly on his knees.

"Get up onto yore feet, yuh owlhooter," Ace ordered. "Never mind yore gun. I'm going to holster mine because I want yuh with my bare hands. Onto—yore—feet!"

Slowly, reluctantly, Evans stood and backed away from Ace until he rested against old Waine's desk.

"So it's the Ace-of-Diamonds again, huh?" Evans attempted a recovery of his calmness. "Well, hombre, it ain't going to do yuh much good. Without yore gun, knowin' how yore side an' one arm are busted up, I'll clean yuh up in no time, the same as the boys are cleaning out the Diamond B right now."

"I'm goin' to beat yuh 'most to death, Evans," Ace drawled with terrible meaning. "Stand straight and come and get it."

Evans shot a swift glance at old man Waine. His eyes suddenly flashed flame. He glimpsed the oldster's forty-four.

He leaned forward as if in a crouch to meet Ace Barfield. Instead, he swerved, snatched at the gun. Leaping to one side, he pulled. But Ace was on the alert. He was like lightning with his draw. Two shots blasted. Two shots from Ace's gun. Herb Evans tottered back, almost sitting in Jake Waine's lap.

He attempted a recovery, but with a strange smile on his face, subsided to the floor. He sat up a moment, licking blood which oozed from a corner of his mouth. His breathing was heavy, ragged. But he was talking—talking—

"I—I—suppose I was a bit too—greedy," he mumbled. "Should've been—content with the—the stock. But, yuh don't get the girl, Ace. I saw to that. I left her with Felipe—a nice companion. If I don't show up, he'll carry her across the Border."

A light chuckle broke from Ace as he holstered his gun.

"If yuh can hear me, Evans, listen," he said. "And if yuh can see, let me tell yuh Tess is here. Look around. No, thisaway."

WEAKLY, Herb Evans turned his lolling head. His dull eyes seemed to find life as he glimpsed the trim form of Tess Waine swaying in the doorway.

"Tess!" Evans attempted to stir, but he slumped forward, dead.

A sharp cry escaped Tess Waine. She darted forward, and Ace swallowed hard. Surely Tess was not concerned with the death of this *carcajou* who had done her uncle so much harm?

But Tess Waine rushed to her uncle's side. Ace darted forward. Jake Waine was breathing strangely. He was muttering, fighting hard to tell Tess something.

For a moment or so he found his voice.

"It worked out—all—right, Tess," he said. "I'm done, but all the papers are made over to—yuh. Don't worry none about me . . . I'm old—I been sick—a long time. I—"

That was all. Ace helped catch him. Together they held old Jake while out of doors the blast of rifle fire told Ace that his boys were in, cleaning up.

In due time, Ace drew Tess away.

"Too bad, honey, he breathed. "He's gone down the last long trail where he'll meet up with Dad. They'll patch up all differences between 'em down thataway. Come along now. I'll have Juniper and the boys take over here. Got to get back to King. Yuh'll be better away from here for a time."

Tess looked down at Jake's form a long moment, her eyes clouded with mist. Suddenly she tossed a curl from her face and nodded to Ace.

Together they rode on to the Diamond B, now still as the night itself. There was no sign of fire. All was peaceful.

Later they were sitting at the table to which Willie Wong had brought coffee and sandwiches—Ace, King and Tess. For upwards of a half hour they had reviewed past events and the double tragedy of the loss of old Ace Barfield and Jake Waine.

"It's all over now, kids," King said softly. "Yuh've both been grand, and now I'm leavin' it to Ace to decide what he wants to do. You young uns can either move in here an' I'll buy the Bar W an' move in there,

or—uh—Tess, what's the matter? Have I said somethin' I shouldn't ought to?"

Tess was smiling softly. She looked sweetly at Ace, who slipped his good arm about her and grinned at King.

"What yuh said was okay—okay by me, King," Ace said chuckling. "It wasn't what yuh said was wrong, but the time is wrong for sayin' it. If yuh'll drag yore hide out of the livin' room for a while, mebbeso Tess would ruther discuss the future with me."

King grinned and saluted. He withdrew and Ace turned to Tess.

"What he said, sweet, was what I wanted to say. We've got to reunite our good—uh—friendship an' the—uh—two ranches and King wants to do the right thing—leavin' us alone, together on one or the other ranch. Which?"

"Ace, darling!" Tess kissed him warmly. "Let me catch my breath. Of course King was right. I love you very much, more than I can ever tell you. And when the atmosphere clears—when Uncle Jake and your father are buried and when everything is peaceful again, will you please then ask me to marry you? That's what King and you were trying to make me understand, isn't it?"

Ace took her into his arms and hugged her fiercely, despite the pain that burned in his side.

"Tess, darling!" he breathed. "Us Barfields never was much good with language. Yuh remember me at school? But I'm glad yuh get the general idea. Feel like a breath of fresh air?"

They moved to the veranda, where Ace held her close to him as they watched the dawn light on the horizon—a dawn which was breaking softly with the promise of future peace and happiness, with the siege guns of death for all time silenced.

"The Name's Wayne Morgan, Gents—and I'm Takin' Yuh Both in for Murder!"

WAYNE MORGAN, the far-famed Masked Rider, covered Rickaree Rogan and Latigo Wheeler with his six-guns. He had them dead to rights. They had killed a Wells-Fargo stagecoach driver and molested the passengers—but it wasn't money they were after. They wanted the strange will which the Tonto Twins had left—a will written in the form of a verse which held clues to buried treasure.

Morgan relieved the two owlhooters of their Colts—and took from them the document which they had stolen. Then he handed the pair over to the sheriff, and went to see Ted Stoy and Carmelita Stockton, the legal heirs of the Tonto Twins. Everything seemed on the road to solution—but Rogan and Wheeler had themselves sprung from jail, and from that time forward stalked the range with killer-lust in their eyes. They were out to get Wayne Morgan—and the treasure!

You'll thrill to the Masked Rider's daring as he matches wits with an evil gang of conspirators while carrying on an intensive quest for the hidden wealth in order to present it to its rightful owners. You've never read a more colorful or exciting yarn than this smashing epic of the badlands that brings you Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk at their fighting best!

THE HAUNTED HOLSTER

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

Next Issue's Action-Packed Complete Masked Rider Novel

Leander's straight left hook met the waddy straight on the point of his chin

TWO-GUN JOKE FROM VIRGINNY

By RICHARD BRISTER

When a town boss tries to use transplanted Leander Lee in a coyote scheme, the young Southerner springs a surprise!

LEANDER LEE was drunk. He was loquaciously, aggressively, poetically drunk. Like a dark cloud which has soaked up an uncontainable quantity of moisture, he loosed a torrent of large, fine-sounding words.

"My poor bemused friend," he said to the alkali-begrimed range jockey who stood wide-mouthed beside him, "you don't mean to tell me you really believe that we have free speech in this country? Come, come, man, you're trying to spoof me."

The range-hardened cowhand recovered his somewhat shaken dignity by winking

broadly at the white-aproned bartender.

"Yore tongue don't appear to be fightin' no curb bit, Lee," he drawled. "If you ain't a cryin'-out-loud example of free speech, I never seen one."

"Rot!" exploded Leander, and bought time to formulate his reply by pouring a fresh drink from the tall bottle before him.

His young-seeming, almost too-handsome face was flushed, not alone from the drink he had taken. For here was a man, he instinctively sensed, who could give him the salty, satisfying sort of conversational fodder for which his hungry mind yearned.

"Rot!" he repeated, and cast a designing eye upon his opponent. "I speak my mind out boldly enough, when I'm drunk. And I get away with it for that very reason. Only fools take offense at a man in his cups."

"Seems to me," the waddy interposed gently, "yuh've built up quite a rep hereabouts for speakin' yore mind, drunk or sober. Yuh don't think like most folks tend to, from all I hear. How long yuh think an outspoken man like you would live, anywhere's else but in this country?"

Leander's owlish eyes brushed the man up and down as he considered the question. Beneath the caked alkali dust which covered the cowboy from boots to Stetson, was a block-square face, a stone-rugged body, and eyes that danced with bemused intelligence under bushy black brows.

"You interest me, friend," said Leander. "You seem to carry a bit of gray matter under that Stetson. As for your question"—Leander's dark eyes danced with tiny pinpoints of expectant delight—"suppose I answer it this way."

He cupped hands to his mouth, turned from the rider, and emitted a strident, roof-rattling bellow.

"Keenan! Peg-Leg Keenan, come down here!"

Men jerked around, startled, and some, who had been amusedly eavesdropping on Leander's flowery conversation with the young rider, stepped back from him quickly, as if to deny all alliance with him. For the man he had so roughly hailed down the bar was co-owner with his brother Dodge of the Gopher Hole Saloon, in which all were standing.

The brothers were a power in Arrowtip, hard, grasping, iron-willed men, who exacted and got a proper deference from their less gifted fellows.

ALL eyes focused now on the peg-legged part owner as he glared down toward Leander. He was a tall man, this "Peg-Leg" Keenan, and thin enough to serve for a human sun dial, though the stoop of his bony shoulders would cast a curved shadow. His head was enormous. His sparse black hair flared away from a wide massive forehead, bespeaking an intellect which more than offset his physical weakness. Hard black eyes, deep-sunk and rimmed with shadowy crow's feet, glared shrewdly out of a face so terrifyingly vicious that the mothers of Arrowtip used it constantly as a reminder when disciplining their unruly children.

Peg-Leg Keenan did not move an inch during the first few seconds after Leander hailed him. Then, with the instinctive timing of a born showman, he set down his glass, turned from the circle of men who stood around him, and walked with deliberately slow steps toward Leander.

His peg-leg made an ominous *clop-clop* on the crude pine plank flooring. Men lowered their eyes as he passed, and stepped back to make way for him.

He came face to face with Leander who was poised negligently, one foot on the rail, one arm on the top of the bar, grinning impudently at the most powerful man in the county.

"You let out that moose bellow, Lee?" the saloon owner snapped sharply.

"Sure did," Leander Lee said matter-of-factly. And in a quick aside to his friend, he whispered, "Free speech, hear? Now keep your eyes and ears open."

"What was that?" snapped Peg-Leg, his hard eyes clouded with impatience. "I take it yuh've got somethin' to say, Lee. I'm waitin' to hear it."

Leander Lee's eyes twinkled with fierce delight, and he drew a deep breath.

"I've got things to say, yes," he said. "My young friend here believes in free speech. This is a test of that principle, Keenan." He looked straight at the gaunt saloon owner and accused, "The liquor you're sellin' over this bar is slow poison, Keenan. Popskull. Worse than trade whisky. A self-respecting Indian wouldn't wash his hands with it."

Peg-Leg Keenan lifted his bony right hand.

"Dodge!" he snapped, and in two short seconds his younger brother, Dodge Keenan, stood ranged beside him.

No man could guess these two were

brothers. Dodge Keenan was one solid mass of muscle, built like a wrestler, with dangling apelike arms, prodigious hands, and fingers like fat sausages. His head was a close-cropped boulder, his close-set eyes held a meanness to match that in his brother's eyes, but there all resemblance between them ended.

For where Nature had endowed Peg-Leg with brains and a paper-thin body, Dodge was a clod, stupid, childishly proud only of his enormous muscles.

His presence beside Peg-Leg breathed confidence into the older brother.

"Anything more on yore mind, Lee?" Peg-Leg suggested.

"Plenty," Leander said glibly. "Your roulette wheel's crooked as a cat's tail, and you've robbed this town of a fortune every night since the Gopher Hole opened."

"Go on." Peg-Leg Keenan's thin lips tightened.

"You're a cold-blooded murderer," Leander plunged recklessly, "even if you do liquidate your victims by proxy."

"Proxy?"

"I mean, have Dodge or one of your hired guns kill them."

"Have yuh finished?" Peg-Leg said, with a thoughtful frown.

"No. You're a big man in this town, Keenan, but no man ever gets so big he doesn't have his frightened moments. You're scared, Keenan. The law's coming west, by leaps and bounds. We've got an honest sheriff in this town tonight, in Jim Portal, and you're afraid of him."

Peg-Leg Keenan was suddenly laughing. With a true showman's instinct, he had reacted in a way the crowd least expected. That was his trick, to pull the surprise play that would dismay by its very unexpectedness.

He seemed caught in a convulsion of laughter. His lank frame was bent double with it.

"I'm afraid of Jim Portal, hey?" he chortled. "That's right interestin', Lee. Could be yuh ain't heard about Portal bein' stove in?"

Leander stared at him suspiciously. It would not be the first time in Arrowtip's hectic span of years that an honest sheriff had died bucking the Keenan brothers. Providing, of course, that the sheriff *was* dead.

Leander had a strong hunch it was true, though, that Portal had been put out of the way by the vicious Dodge, or some other of Peg-Leg's gunmen.

"If that's true," said Leander, "then you gave the order for him to be killed, Keenan. Which proves my point. You were afraid of Portal. Else why take the trouble to kill him?"

Still the hawk-faced saloonman chuckled. He could do that in this town, for he owned the town of Arrowtip, Arizona, and no accusations hurled by Leander Lee, the town wastrel, could possibly jeopardize Peg-Leg's position. Perhaps that was why he was so much amused. Laughter comes easy to him who sees the world from a mountain-top of his own designing.

"I ain't denyin' one word of what yuh been sayin', Lee," Peg-Leg Keenan said, with an indulgent smile. "For one thing, yuh're drunk. For another, yuh've been drunk every night since yuh rode in from Virginny. Yuh don't work a lick, and yuh've said yore ownself yuh ain't a fighter. About all yuh're good for is shootin' off yore mouth. Mebbe somewheres there's a place for a man whose long suit is lingo, but this town's got yuh down for a no-'count bum. And yuh durn well know it."

LEANDER shrugged with composure.

"If you have a point, Keenan, I wish you'd come to it."

"My point's just this. You don't bother me no more'n a mongrel yappin' at my hoss's feet in a barnyard, Lee."

Leander lifted his eyebrows and bowed. "A pretty figure of speech, Keenan. I congratulate you."

The gaunt man grinned. "Yuh was hopin' I'd have yuh thrown out on yore ear, so's to prove yore own point to that feller beside yuh. That free speech business. I'm right sorry I couldn't oblige yuh. Fact is, I'd've been cuttin' my nose off to spite my face if I'd done like you wanted. Business has picked up more'n yuh'd guess, since yuh started spoutin' all them crazy ideas and flowery words. Yuh been drawin' as good as a Chicago juggler."

Leander clucked gently. "I can assure you I had no intention of filling your pockets, Keenan."

"Fine," taunted the owner. "Give 'em more of that, Lee. That's just the kind of stuff they come in for."

He laughed tauntingly and lurched away. He had carved a clean victory in the battle of words, and the big room laughed with him.

The laughter had nothing of viciousness in it, for every man present had been amused by Leander's sprightly tongue, at some time or other. There was in him a certain lightness of spirit which drew men to him as if to a magnet. He was that man in a hundred of whom it could ungrudgingly be said that none who came to know him could dislike him.

But while he knew the laughter contained no mockery, he rebelled against it. He had not known that he had unwittingly increased the Gopher Hole's business. He felt a sudden urge to be out of the place, to breath deeply the clean night air.

"Care for a walk and a bit of fresh ozone?" he asked the rider beside him.

"Don't mind if I do," said the waddy, and as they went through the batwings, he added, "Name's Cardwell. Oliver Cardwell. Boys call me Ollie."

On the board walk they shook hands. Leander was totally unprepared for the iron pressure of Cardwell's grasp. His fingers crackled, and he bit his lip to keep from voicing his anguish. Then he began to exert an answering pressure, slowly, inexorably. Soon the cowboy's face was blanching with pain, and had Lee cared to he could have forced Cardwell down on his knees. Instead, he loosed his hold and chuckled.

"Caught me off guard, Cardwell, there at the outset."

Ollie Cardwell was staring with amazement at his numbed fingers.

"And you're the man who's spent the last two months in the Gopher Hole soppin' up red-eye! What yore strength must have been before yuh started that!"

Leander smiled. "My particular branch of Virginia Lees are rather—should I say notorious or famous? My grandfather's still taking his pint of neat daily, and he's nudging eighty."

Ollie blinked. "Sounds like an entertainin' old gent. I wonder why yuh left him."

Leander's eyes clouded. His confidence was invited, he realized, and while he had liked this lean, slab-muscled cowboy from the moment he saw him, still he hesitated.

"It's a long story, Cardwell," he said.

"And a longer night. And the name's Ollie, Leander."

Leander gave him a warm glance, and unceremoniously seated himself upon the board walk. Ollie squatted beside him, and produced tobacco and papers. When two cigarettes had been fired, Leander drew a deep lungful of blue smoke and launched into his story.

"First off, I'm quality, Ollie. Nothing snobbish, you know, but in Virginia the Devereaux Lees always did stack up for something."

"Reckon so," said Ollie, "since—"

"I only mention that so you'll understand what comes later," Leander said quickly. "It was a duel brought me out here to Arizona. I suppose some folks back home would say 'chased me out here.' "

"A duel?" Ollie's eyes opened wide.

"We still have them." Leander Lee nodded. "On the quiet, of course. Affairs of honor, we call them, though they're so seldom that. But heaven help the law enforcement agent who dares to meddle."

"So a duel chased yuh out here?" Ollie Cardwell was trying desperately to understand.

"Some folks put it that way," muttered Leander. "You see—I didn't fight. I refused to accept the fellow's challenge."

There was a long painful silence.

"Why not?" Ollie finally asked.

"It was a man named Purvis. Jefferson Randall Purvis. I've known Jeff since we were both knee-high. We'd always been neighbors. Once, down at the old pond I dived off a limb of a high elm and struck my head on a stone. Knocked me out. And I carry a scar in my scalp that is a constant reminder of my debt to Jeff Purvis."

"He fished yuh out." Ollie nodded. "I can see how yuh must have felt, called on to take potshots at him when yuh were growed up. What was all the ruckus between yuh?"

"What else but a woman? But what a woman!" Leander made a grimace. "As brazen a little two-faced schemer as ever danced a cotillion. All of us fellows knew that—except poor old Jeff. Big, shy, and addle-pated, he fell in love with her, and couldn't see she was after him because his father owned half our county in burley. Pipe tobacco."

OLLIE clucked sympathetically.

"So you must have spoke yore mind about his little angel, then nothin' would do but pistols at dawn. And you refused. Yuh

wouldn't fight. That what yuh're tryin' to tell me?"

Leander stood up. "You don't believe I'm afraid to fight!" he said chokingly.

"Yuh forget I heard Peg-leg talking," Ollie said coldly. "He seemed to think yuh won't fight at any time, Lee, not for any reason."

Leander's cheeks burned with anger. "Not for killing stupidly," he gritted. "And I won't kill for greed, or to satisfy conceit. But there's a thing a man of my convictions *can* fight for."

Ollie Cardwell's voice was like scalding water. "And that is?" Ollie said.

"For the pleasure of it!" grated Leander. "For the satisfaction of throttling the tongues of Doubting Thomases like yourself, friend Ollie."

And on the instant he was on the waddy, bearing him heavily to the dirt of the street with the jolting shock of their impact together.

Ollie Cardwell wrapped sinewy arms around Leander's slight torso and squeezed mightily. Leander felt his ribs smart like hot coals, under that pressure. He choked as dust passed his gasping lips.

He heaved mightily with his spread legs, and turned the cowboy, twisting clear of Ollie's viselike clasp. Both sprang erect, like two agile beasts of the forest, and with bare knuckles continued the battle.

Ollie was agile and strong, and his eyes probed the shadows more truly than did the drink-glazed eyes of Leander. But Leander had skill with his fists. He struck out repeatedly at the fleeting target Ollie made in the darkness, and a fair quota of those blows landed. Each time they did, Leander gave a slight twist to his knuckles, which in turn was transmitted to Ollie's face, to his cheeks, to his lips, to his bushy eyebrows. In five minutes the slab-muscled rider's face was an unrecognizable mask of cuts, welts, and bruises. Blood flowed freely across his tanned forehead, trickled through his brows, into his eyes, and clouded his vision.

Roaring with fury, he charged Leander like a crazed mountain lion, and struck out hard with both fists at Leander's stomach. There he found a vulnerable target for Leander's face twisted sickly, and he staggered back in misery.

Whooping, Ollie leaped in again, and he did not even see the straight left hook upon which Leander neatly impaled him. It met him squarely upon the point of his chin. Pinwheels of light danced in his darkened vision, and he felt himself falling into a bottomless pit.

When Ollie came to, Leander Lee was back on his perch on the board walk, gagging and panting. Leander looked up from between spread legs, and caught Ollie's eyes on him.

Ollie sat up, somewhat stiffly. "I'm beat, Leander," he mumbled. "Fair and square. And I'd no call to aim at yore middle."

Leander grinned. "All's fair. And as for who won, I'd make it a draw. That one to your jaw was the last decent punch in me."

Ollie stood up and held out his hand. "Is a Doubtin' Thomas ever forgiven?"

He was, with so little reservation on the part of warm-hearted Leander Lee that the two shared a hotel room that night. . . .

They awakened together the following morning, when a loud thumping threatened to burst their flimsy door from its hinges.

Leander took his pounding head between trembling hands and growled irately:

"What in thunder's the big noise about?"

"Get up, Lee!" called a voice from the hall. "This here's goin' to be a big day for you. Yuh've got a job. Peg-Leg Keenan's just rigged up one of them tricky elections of his'n, and had you chose for sheriff!"

Leander considered this bit of news with bowed head, his forehead wrinkling. When he spoke, his voice held a strained inflection.

"So I'm to be Peg-Leg Keenan's sheriff, Ollie. Pushed into office only because he feels I'm utterly harmless, and that my wearing the star will permit him an even freer hand on the reins of this town than he had under Jim Portal. What a colossal joke he must think he's put over on me. Leander Lee, the town's wastrel, the man of a million words—and no six-guns. I thought there was something lurking in his scheming mind behind his smile, when I read the riot act to him, last night."

"He's gettin' even, Leander," said Ollie.

LEANDER stared out the small window, brooding.

"Do you believe in Fate?" he asked suddenly.

"Fate" Ollie spoke as if he didn't know the word.

"Examine this situation, Ollie. Here am I, Leander Lee, aged twenty-four, late out of

Virginia, with all that I ever lived for irrevocably behind me. I am out of tune with this world, Ollie. I have lost my beliefs, my faith in the essential rightness of human nature. I have been steadily throwing myself away these past months, with Peg-Leg Keenan's rotgut liquor to help me."

"But what's that got to do with yuh bein' sheriff?"

"Hear me out," begged Leander. "Does it not occur to you that this weird development could be the machination of a prankish Fate? A man in my state of mind can be dangerous, Ollie. Much more dangerous than our Mr. Peg-Leg Keenan could ever guess. A man on the road to certain ruin, I have always maintained, should try always to drag a few miscreants up to the gates of Saint Peter."

Ollie stared at him. "Yuh're too deep for me, Leander. Could yuh put that last part in plain talk?"

"I mean," said Leander, "that he's thrown a boomerang this time. For a joke, he's had me appointed sheriff, thinking I'll either hightail out of town like a beaten dog, or else keep drugging myself to death on that slum he sells at the Gopher. But suppose—Leander's eyes grew dreamy—"I fooled him. Suppose I strapped on a pair of guns and began to live up to that star he's forced on me."

"Huh?"

"There are a lot of rats in Arrowtip," said Leander. "But there are also plenty of law-abiding people. If Peg-Leg and Dodge could be attended to the other rats would run to the desert so fast you couldn't see them for dust."

"Yuh mean—yuh'd go after the Keenans?" Ollie Cardwell stared open-mouthed. "Y-yuh're crazy, Leander. Look, have yuh ever so much as shot a six-gun?"

"I have," said Leander. "There was an old-timer named Bart Ballew with the caravan when I came out here. An old bonanza-town marshal. We used to go off a mile from camp, each night, and blaze away for hours on end. He had a bagful of gunslinging tricks, and he taught me to shave down the time of my draw to the fractional second."

Ollie nodded thoughtfully. "There'd be the surprise in yore favor, all right. But cuss it, Leander, yuh can't do it. They've got too many gun-handy fellers on their side."

"When you have struck down the leaders," Leander said, "you have no more army. All that remains is a rabble."

"Well, mebbe—but I don't know."

"No use," Leander said, with a shake of his head, "I've decided."

Ollie Cardwell looked at him long and thoughtfully. A light of excitement danced in his gray eyes.

"Yuh know how much I'm drawin' a month, for ridin' fence, bustin' broncs, ridin' night herd, and generally breakin' my back for the Bar B outfit?" he asked.

Leander looked a question.

"Forty and found!" Ollie said disgustedly, and grinned boyishly at Leander. "How much yuh reckon a deputy ought to draw down, Sheriff?"

"No," said Leander coldly. "This is my private ruckus. But"—his throat clogged up a little—"thanks, Ollie."

Ollie looked at him levelly. "I'll take that offer."

Leander sighed, looked glum, then smiled. "All right then, Mr. Deputy. How about sneaking downstairs and wrestling up a pair of six-guns for the new sheriff?"

Ollie Cardwell returned about one hour later, bearing a brand new cartridge belt, complete with holsters, in which nestled a pair of far from new Navy Colts. Leander hefted them with a discerning frown, and looked a question at Ollie.

"Borrowed the guns, one each from a couple of two-gun rannies I've rode range with. Had to buy the cartridges, belt and sheaths from the saddle shop. Set me back nigh onto ten dollars."

Leander made a mental note of the amount.

"Pay you out of my first wages as sheriff, Ollie, if I live to draw any."

"Yuh're shore yuh know how to handle them irons?" Ollie said. "There seems to be quite a reception waitin' for yuh, between the hotel and the Gopher Hole. More folks on Main Street than I ever seen, this time of the mornin'. Got a feelin' the town wants to look yuh over in yore new job, Leander. And mebbe rough yuh around a little."

"I know. I've been watching the street from the window. It's Peg-Leg Keenan's men, mostly. Probably out there on orders." Lee sat in silence a moment. "Well, no use prolonging the agony, is there? Let's go down. And—uh—listen, promise me something, Ollie. Promise me you won't jump to

any sudden conclusions, the way you did last night, no matter what happens down there."

Ollie frowned. "What yuh up to?"

"I mean to get through to the Keenans," said Leander grimly. "And—uh—this is my battle, mostly. Don't you go sticking your head into a noose for me until you have to. Might be better if you tag behind me a little, and just do what you can to see fair play."

"All right, Leander."

THEY went down, Leander taking the lead, Ollie coming along about ten paces behind him.

A couple of Keenan's gunmen, Rufe Potts and Dig Dawes, were in the dirty lobby. The men snapped around, leering, as Leander stepped off the stairway. For a moment they stared numbstruck, then Rufe Potts grinned.

"Well, I'll be hogtied, Dig, if he ain't wearin' six-shooters!" he sneered.

Dig Dawes laughed loudly. "Good mornin', Sheriff." He grinned at Leander. "Watch out them guns don't chafe yore legs."

Leander shrugged. "Thanks for the tip, Dig," he said in a small voice. "I'll be careful about that."

He was such a hopeless sight, such a perfect parody of a lawman, standing there at the foot of the staircase, that the men were disarmed. They had been prepared to taunt him, to make a fool of him, but his very ineffectuality disarmed them completely.

Rufe Potts could think of nothing to say. He came forward and pinned a large star on Leander's lapel, then stepped back to survey it.

"There yuh are, Leander. Looks like now yuh're a full-fledged sheriff. Present from Peg-Leg." He guffawed loudly, and Dig Dawes joined him.

"Where is Peg-Leg?" Leander asked. "I'd sort of like to drop in and thank him and Dodge. You s'pose they'd be down at the Gopher Hole, this time of the morning?"

"Shore would. They'll be plumb happy to see yuh."

Without another word Leander walked out to the street. There were more of Peg-Leg Keenan's men out there, and they were better prepared for him. They laughed uproariously as he made his appearance. They stopped him on the board walk and walked around him with admiring glances, like men at a horse fair circling mounts that are about to go under the gavel.

"Good mornin', Leander. I mean, good mornin', Sheriff."

"Where'd yuh get them ugly-lookin' hog-legs, Leander?"

"Hey, yuh goin' down to the Gopher for yore usual nip afore breakfast, Sheriff?"

"Won't ruin yore shootin' eye, will it, Leander?"

"What's the matter, huh? Cat ain't finally got *yore* tongue, has it?"

To all these taunts Leander said not a word. He looked neither to his right nor his left, and walked down toward the Gopher Hole soberly, his face a mask that showed none of his feelings.

The men were incensed by the barrenness of the ground their seeds of insult had fallen upon. They grew less jocular, more abusive. Rufe Potts came up behind Leander and pushed him. Dig Dawes caught Leander, as the new sheriff stumbled and tossed him back the other way. The other men shouted their pleasure, and formed a circle around him.

"Throw him this way, boys! . . . Here, give me a crack at him!"

Leander was flung about like a feather several times. He suddenly lifted a gun from his pocket and shot at the sky. The circle broadened around him. Men slapped hands to their gun butts and growled under their breaths, glaring at him.

Leander gazed angrily around the circle of faces. Then slowly he unfastened his belt and tossed it, with his dangling guns, to the nearest watcher. He looked hard at Rufe Potts.

"You started this thing, Rufe. Mayhap you're willing to put up your guns and step in this circle with me. If I'm going to be the new sheriff in Arrowtip, there's going to be none of this kind of nonsense."

"Good gravy!" howled a voice from the watching circle. "He's still drunk from last night."

"I don't know," said another man. "Seems like he means it."

"Go on, Rufe. Put up your irons and give him a set-to."

"Slap him down, Rufe!"

Rufe Potts was grinning. He unbuckled his guns and stepped into the circle, facing Leander.

"I think I'll drag it out a little, gents," he announced disdainfully. "I been just achin' to beat up on a shore enough sheriff."

He came lunging at Leander, his huge

hands outspread. Leander stepped aside, his face twisted with fear, and seemed on the point of bolting through the crowd in full flight. The watchers crowed at him mockingly.

Rufe stuck a big paw out and in both of his own hands, Leander took it and twisted it quickly sideward. He still looked frightened to death, but he held on to that hand as a man might hold onto a spar, while half-drowning.

Rufe did a neat somersault in the air and dug his head into the hard packed dust of the street. There was a sharp thud and a tiny clicking sound, and there he lay, groaning, his face turning ash-white, one hand clutched to his collar-bone.

"It—it's broke!" he was gasping. "Clean's a whistle."

Leander put a wavery hand to his forehead.

"I—I don't know how it could've happened," he muttered, buckling on his gun belt. "I didn't mean—I hate fighting, blast it! I just can't stand to hurt things."

He turned away from the circle of watchers, acting out his little charade.

"I need a drink," he said grimly. "Excuse me, fellows."

MEN recovered their high spirits quickly. They trooped into the Gopher Hole at his heels, chuckling gleefully at what had happened.

"Never would have believed it if yuh hadn't seen it," was the general opinion. "Scared to death of big Rufe, and yet he puts him plumb out. Craziest thing I ever laid eyes on."

Ollie Cardwell stood at the back of the circle, smiling thinly, and thought his own thoughts about what had happened. He kept a sharp eye on Leander, taking his own cues from Leander's behavior.

Leander downed the pick-up drink he had mentioned, then announced to the men who stood near him:

"I'm going into the office and say my thanks to the Keenans for making me sheriff." He waved at the tall bottle on the bar before him. "Free drinks on the new sheriff until that bottle's empty."

There was a rush toward the spot, the men extending their glasses greedily, while one man, appointing himself to the chore, dispensed Leander's whisky freely. Leander strolled almost unobserved toward the Keenans' office.

He went in without knocking. He closed the door swiftly behind him, but not so swiftly he failed to observe Ollie Cardwell taking up a position at the other side of it. Good old Ollie, he thought. Ollie would make sure he had at least a few undisturbed moments inside, with the Keenans. And the rest was entirely up to Leander.

Peg-Leg Keenan was behind his big desk. Dodge was sitting on it, one massive leg dangling over it. Both looked up in surprise as Leander entered. Peg-Leg's shrewd glance focused upon the guns Leander was wearing.

"What kind of nonsense is this, Lee?" he demanded. "You wearin' hardware?"

Leander touched the star on his lapel. "You made me a sheriff, Keenan," he said quietly. "You aren't really surprised when a sheriff wears guns? Or are you?"

"What's the idea bustin' in here without knocking then?" snapped the gaunt saloon owner. "Dodge," he growled at his giant brother, "throw the fool out."

Leander put a hand to one of his guns and said tightly:

"I wouldn't move if I were you, Dodge."

"Why, yuh crazy fool!"

"I'm talking, Keenan. And as sheriff, I've got some important news for you. I'm taking the pair of you down to the jail and locking you in. The charge will be murder, and I'll make it stick, before I'm through with you."

"Get out!" snarled Peg-Leg Keenan. "Get out of my office, yuh locoed donkey, before I gun-whip yuh!"

"Let me handle it," growled Dodge Keenan. "There ain't but one kind of words this hombre'll understand, I'm thinkin'." He stood up, a towering mountain in that small room, and looped his thumbs in his belt, staring hard at Leander. "I'm going to kill yuh, feller. I'm goin' to—"

And then, true to his nature, he was grabbing his guns, with a thrust of both hands like lightning itself.

Leander had guessed that that was to be the way of it. He knew these men, knew they would stoop to anything to gain an advantage. His own hands leaped downward, came up spewing flame and leaden death full into the big man's chest. One slug must have pierced the giant's heart, for he toppled down as if struck by a pole-axe.

Leander peered through the haze of smoke toward the other brother. Fear shone in

Peg-Leg Keenan's bleak eyes, and a fiendish madness. His bony hand was fumbling at the sleeve of his black coat as Leander busied himself with the younger brother.

An ominous-looking derringer appeared in the man's hands and spouted viciously. Leander felt a sledge pound his shoulder, went hurtling backward. He felt strength oozing swiftly from him, and backed to the wall, leaning heavily against it.

He triggered at Keenan, saw his slug drive a hole in the wall behind the man's head, and triggered again. Peg-Leg Keenan crumpled and stared at him dumbly. The man dropped to the floor, still gazing sickly toward Leander.

Leander hadn't the strength to shoot again. He watched Keenan crawl, catlike, toward where Dodge's gun had fallen. He watched Keenan grasp the gun, lift it and point it at him. Then a shot rang out from the doorway, and a neat hole appeared in Keenan's head, just in front of the ear. The man flopped to the floor and lay still.

"In here, Ollie," Leander croaked weakly. "Quick. And bolt that door in back of you."

Ollie Cardwell stepped into the room, holding a smoking six-gun, and his eyes were alive with excitement. "It's been a good show, Leander. Yuh hit bad?"

"'Tis not so deep as a well,'" Leander quoted, and gasped with pain as the wound gouged at him.

There was a pounding of fists on the door which Ollie had closed behind him.

"Peg-Leg? Dodge? You in there? What's happened?"

"They're both dead," said Leander. "There's going to be a new deal in Arrowtip from now on, boys. You all helped to vote me in as sheriff. And I'm working at it. I'm coming out, hear? I've got a deputy with me. The first man who starts taking pot-shots at either of us goes straight to jail and stands trial for assault of a lawman." He nodded at Ollie. "Open the door. And be ready for whatever."

OLLIE swung the door open. Leander straightened up, tucked his hands in his belt, and walked out there stiffly. The men made a grudging path for him, their pale eyes clouding with resentment. But no man moved to stop Lee or Ollie.

"We'll swear in more deputies, Ollie," Leander said, when they reached the street. "Half the town, if need be. We've got them now. It was seeing Dodge and Peg-Leg that turned the trick for us. They're scared silly, for the moment."

"I have a confession to make Leander," Ollie said. "I'm not what yuh think I am."

"If it's something you're ashamed of," said Leander, "I don't want to hear it. You're my friend. That's all that's important."

"I came to this town at the request of yore father."

"What?"

"My dad knew yores back East, before our clan moved out here to Arizona. Yore father had yuh traced out here to Arrowtip, somehow. Then when he saw how close this town was to our home ranch, he wrote my dad to sort of keep a weather eye on yuh. My dad handed the job over to me, since he's ailin'. And—well, that's how come I just happened to be drinkin' alongside of yuh last night in the Gopher."

Leander was frowning, then smiling. "To keep an eye on me? Or to drink with me?"

"Yore father's been worried half sick about yuh, Leander. He knows the whole story about that duel, why yuh couldn't make yoreself go through with it, and he's plumb ashamed of hisself. He wants yuh home."

"He could have written to me," said Leander. "If he had me traced out here, if he knew where I was, as you say, why didn't he?"

"They used to grow proud men in Virginia," said Ollie, "as I remember."

"Still do," said Leander, and his eyes misted over at the memory of green rolling fields, of fine blooded horses, of the friends with whom he had grown up. "I'm one of them, Ollie." A wave of nausea swept him, and he clutched the rough bandage Ollie had applied to the bullet-hole in his shoulder. "But I'm not going back till I've made sure this town's cleaned up for good. Till law and order have a solid footing. We've both just taken our lives in hand to prove something. I won't see all that effort wasted."

Ollie Cardwell was smiling.

"I'll stick around that long myself," he said, and grinned. "We'll go it together, till the good work is finished. Yore dad'll be proud, Leander. Proud as a peacock."

Next Issue's Novel: THE HAUNTED HOLSTER, by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

The sudden scampering of a rabbit, or coyote, a flash of lightning, a peal of thunder, a pistol shot, or just anything that frightened one animal might within a moment be transmitted to the entire herd and once in the fright of a stampede the wild cattle would stop at nothing, sometimes piling headlong over a precipice, while the hoofbeats of so many animals would sound like the roll of distant thunder.

In case of a stampede it was the duty of any and every cowboy who could, to ride to the head of the herd, to try and force the leader or leaders to run in a circle until they were nearly exhausted and the fright had somewhat subsided. Any cowboy riding to the head of a stampeded herd knew full well that to be thrown from his mount, or for his horse to fall, as they some times did in running so swiftly over the uneven terrain, meant almost sure death. It meant falling in the path of a herd in stampede with thousands of sharp hooves ready to grind a rider to bits.

However, the love of adventure in the early American cowboy was such that it was the ambition of every ranch boy in Texas to go up the trail to Kansas. It was also the ambition of thousands of boys in Massachusetts and elsewhere, and many of them obeyed Horace Greeley's advice ("Go West, young man") in order to realize their ambition. So not all of the trail drivers were born in Texas or the Southwest, in fact the majority of them were born in other states.

Routine of the Trail

It did not take many days to accustom men and cattle alike to the routine of the trail. By daylight every morning the cattle would be up and grazing away from their bed grounds, headed north, and all hands except the last guard would have eaten breakfast.

Then, while the last guard ate, the rest of the crew would begin stringing the cattle out. By the time they were in good traveling formation the men left behind would be up with the herd and in their places. All day it was "walk along, little dogies," halting only to graze and water. The cattle would ordinarily begin putting on flesh if carried along at a slow moderate pace, with grazing intervals, provided water was plentiful.

At night the outfit would be divided into three guards. Normally this arrangement left several hours for sleep, but if the weather was bad or threatened to be bad the trail boss would usually order all men on herd or

[*Turn page*]

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guard, and if a cowboy said anything about being sleepy he was usually told that he could sleep all the next winter.

Good and Bad Bosses

There were good and bad trail bosses. Some seemed to try and save their men as much as their cattle, some seemed to feel that a cowboy should never be allowed to take it easy. The trail drivers soon learned about the latter kind and one trip was as much as any one cowboy would make with such a trail boss. Usually for the second trip, such a trail boss would have an entirely new crew.

Some trail bosses, in order to save their own horseflesh, would call out those who furnished their own horses whenever there was use for extra horses, and this was a practise that those men who furnished their own horses resented. Yet there was seldom an open rupture between a trail boss and his men, for quitting a herd on the trail was much like leaving a ship in mid-ocean, because the chuck wagon that was carried along to provide meals for the crew might be the only place for miles and miles where a fellow could eat.

Then, too, it is mighty lonely to be cast adrift in the wilderness, and for these reasons a cowboy who did not like his trail boss would nearly always try to keep his temper until the herd reached market.

Plenty of Horse Thieves

Different trail outfits had different methods of handling the saddle horses at night. With some outfits a remudero, or wrangler-"night hawk," as he was often called, herded the horses. Other outfits had no night-herder for the horses but simply hobbled them, but no matter how the horses were handled, horse thieves were liable to make away with some of them on a dark night.

If they were herded a thief could slip in among them and drift a few out. If they were hobbled a thief could catch what he wanted, cut the hobbles, and drive or lead them away. A night wrangler meant an extra man on the payroll, and many of the trail outfits were short of cash and tried to handle the trail drive with as few men as possible. Sometimes this was false economy for it was the small crews that were preyed upon most by Indians and outlaws. If a crew was large and well-armed it was much more apt to be left alone.

Horse thieves worked in various ways to steal horses from trail outfits. A couple of riders might come in to a trail camp just about the time the herd was bedded down, eat supper with the men handling the herd —and anyone was always welcome to come in and eat at a trail camp. After eating they would in all probability tell some kind of a story about having to be at a certain place by a certain time, and would depart soon after darkness came on, and the next morning when the horses were rounded up the trail outfit would be short several horses.

It was difficult to spare men from a crew to hunt down horse thieves, and most times the outfit just shouldered the loss and continued on the trail. Sometimes they would have to buy horses to take the place of those stolen.

The Reward Racket

Some thieves worked the reward racket. They would sneak in at night and steal out a few horses, hide them in the brush and then just happen along the next morning when the loss was discovered. They would tell the trail boss that they knew the country well and could no doubt find the horses for a price.

That price was usually pretty steep, and if the boss agreed to pay the price, they never had any trouble finding the horses.

Those thieves, with any scheme they worked, took chances, for men of the trail were quick to shoot or hang any horse thief they caught.

There were jokes and comedy mixed in with the dangers of the trail drives. Once a trail boss, Tommie Newton, who it is said was quite a practical joker, was approaching Doan's Crossing on Red River, on the Chisholm Trail. His crew were new and Tommie, who had ridden a couple of miles ahead, came back and told the boys that the river was up, but they were going to swim the cattle across.

He advised each one to take off their guns and strip to their underwear, putting their clothing in the wagon, then to let the herd graze for a couple of hours while he went with the wagon, crossed the river on the ferry above the crossing and that he would meet them on the opposite side.

He took the wagon, but had no trouble in fording the river as it was very low, but one can imagine what all those cowboys said when they rode up to the river wearing only their underwear and found the water hardly knee deep!

A Joke on Ike Pryor

Another joke of the trail was played upon Ike Pryor when he was engaged in driving cattle up the trail and before he was commissioned a colonel. Pryor had gone up the

trail with a herd. One nice fat steer had gotten away and was not missed. Two or three weeks later along the same trail came Bill Jackman with a herd, and he found the steer, now fat and ready for market, saw Pryor's brand upon it and so took it in to his herd intending to turn it over to Pryor when he reached Dodge City or to sell the animal and give Pryor the proceeds of the sale.

A few days after picking up the steer, while going through the Indian Territory, there rode up to the herd a puff-paunched Osage Indian with a gang of warriors and squaws behind him. He asked for the chief. Jackman was pointed out. Then the Indian gravely handed over a folded slip of paper. It read as follows:

"To the trail bosses. This is a good Indian. I know him personally. Give him beef and you will have no trouble getting through his country. Ike Pryor."

Jackman handed the letter back to the Indian, rode in to the herd, cut out Ike Pryor's fine beef, and told the Indian he could have it. Then when Jackman and his crew came across Pryor in Dodge City they told him how well they had obeyed his suggestion of giving the Indian beef. They considered it a good joke, and Pryor laughed with them. If he did not think it funny he was too smart to let them know that it plagued him.

A Great Stampede

A vivid picture of a stampede is in a vivid description by John Young, not just of one herd, but of several herds, in the spring of 1876, just out of Abilene, Kansas, while the several herds were being held awaiting the consummation of the sale of the cattle.

"About a dozen herds it is said, were being held by various trail outfits," wrote Young. "When we unrolled our beds down on the ground that night under the open sky, it was clear, though there was a kind of clammy stillness in the air that indicated a low barometer. When about eleven o'clock one of the men on guard came in to call the second relief, he said the cattle were restless and that a storm was coming.

"'All hands to the herd,' were the orders. The cattle were up milling about, clacking their horns, getting ready to run an hour before they broke. The lightning had begun to play and the rumbling of thunder off in the distance was getting nearer and nearer. They started just as a flash of lightning made the whole world a blinding, blue white. The roar of their running mixed with the roar of the sky was almost deafening.

[*Turn page*]

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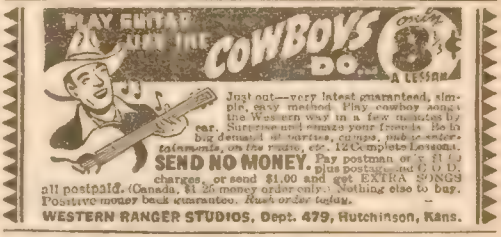

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"Three or four of the boys riding like drunk Indians got in ahead of the leaders and swerved them back. Then the herd began to mill, running in a circle, the cattle in the center of the circle climbing over each other. Constant flashes of lightning gave a glimpse of the scene.

"Balls of fire were playing on the tips of the long horns. Snakes of fire ran over the back of the cattle and darted along the manes of our mounts. Everybody was yelling and this added to the bedlam. With every fresh clap of thunder every animal not too tightly wedged in the mass seemed to jump straight up, and the impact that followed jarred the ground.

"The lightning was playing about us in such a manner that it seemed to be seeking us out, and some of the cowboys took off their spurs and cast them with their six-shooters aside on the prairies. The milling cattle broke through our lines and were off on practically a straight run, and then the rain came in sheets.

"Soon nearly every herd that had been held over quite an area was mixed and split. The herd no longer had a defined point. It was every man for what he could see. Maybe three men would get cut off with a little bunch of fifty cattle and maybe one man would be 'hanging and wrestling' with a thousand head.

"In the pitchy darkness the ground all looked alike and the lightning blinded more than it illuminated. If a man rode over a bluff, into a prairie dog hole or gully, or if he kept on level ground, no matter. He 'hung' with the cattle waiting for daylight to come —or until he broke his own neck or perhaps only a horse's leg. Every gully and sink was soon full of water; the soft places in the ground were boggy, the hard places were slippery. How any man could keep for hours in such a country under such conditions without a serious accident seems almost miraculous. If a man's horse fell, the rider instinctively clung to the reins; then if the horse could get up, it was mount and go on.

"It kept raining and storming. Good horses were ruined for life. All horses were ridden down. When daylight came, here and there were groups, or piles of steers, that had fallen and had been run over by others and crippled. There were broken horns and broken legs aplenty."

A Thrilling Adventure

Here was an instance where cowboys rode all night at the risk of life and limb, tired, sleepy, wet, cold and hungry, yet it was a thrilling adventure, and they cared not if they

were making only two dollars per day. If they were sleepy, as one trail boss had said, they could sleep all next winter. If they were hungry, surely they could make up for that at the very next meal. They had an adventure that they would not have missed for anything in the world.

One who understands the long hours, the hard work and the dangers of the old cattle trails, can hardly blame the cowboys and trail drivers for letting off a little steam in the way of boisterous celebration when they did strike town. Their celebrations helped Dodge City earn the name of Hell Roaring Dodge, but it was a more lawless element than the cowboys that really made that reputation for the cattle market. The cowboys themselves, while loud and boisterous, were not as a rule a bad lot.

The American cowboy since his birth has always been one of the most unique and colorful characters of America, and the old trail drivers were first, last and always cowboys, and it is regrettable that so many of those old trail drivers have reached "Trail's end" and will not be present at the convention to talk over old trail days with their buddies of the longhorn days. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

INTRIGUE and danger pack the pages of THE HAUNTED HOLSTER, the swiftly-paced Wayne Morgan novel by Walker A. Tompkins in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. In this exciting yarn, a strange will has been left by two old timers known as the "Tonto Twins," Jeremiah Stoy, and his partner, Don Benito Stockton, who amassed a large fortune in raw gold during a lifetime of prospecting throughout Arizona Territory.

As the sole heirs Ted Stoy, and his financee, Carmelita Stockton, are each to receive one half of the legacy when they are both twenty-one. The key to the hiding place of the gold depends upon the interpretation of a a peculiar will which the Tonto Twins left on file at the office of a firm of attorneys in Adobeville. So Ted and Carmelita start for the town by Overland stage.

But ambush death waits for the weekly Wells-Fargo stagecoach as it jounces its dusty way between the lava beds and quicksand bogs of Sumadero Desert.

Richaree Rogan and Latigo Wheeler have been hidden in the notched crown of Massacre Peak since sun-up, their horses saddled and waiting, rifles ready at their sides.

Rogan, a swarthy quarter-breed with

[*Turn page*]

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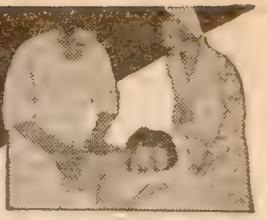

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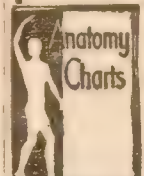

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smallpox scars disfiguring his lean face, is stretched out on the cinder outcrop, studying the oncoming stagecoach through the telescopic sights of his rifle.

"We're in luck, pardner," he says, centering the cross hairs on the driver of the Concord. "Old Man Pettigrew is the jehu, and he ain't carryin' a shotgun guard on this run."

Latigo Wheeler nervously fingers the lever of his Winchester.

"The important thing," Wheeler points out gruffly, "is whether them passengers from Texas is aboard. Thad Burgess is payin' us to keep Ted Stoy and Carmelita Stockton from reachin' Adobeville alive. We can't jump this stage if they ain't aboard."

Rogan shifts the rifle to keep the powerful 'scope centered on the red-and-yellow Concord, now sweeping around the curve where the road makes a semi-circle to avoid Massacre Peak.

"No doubt about them two bein' on the stage," Rogan reports, a note of excitement creeping into his voice. "Straddle yore bronc, Latigo. I'll pick off the driver and cover you while you run down the team in case they stampede."

Wheeler jumps up and races back into the deep cleft of the cinder cone where their horses wait. He is in the saddle by the time Rogan centers his telescopic sights on the scrawny figure of Lee Pettigrew, tooling the Adobeville stage directly abreast the cinder peak.

The gunstock recoils against Rogan's shoulder as the sharp flat whipcrack of the shot volleys off through the rarefied Arizona air.

Pettigrew never knows what hits him. Skull pierced by a copper-jacketed bullet, the veteran Wells Fargo driver drops the lines and slumps forward against the footboards.

Wheeler spurs into the open and sends his powerful horse down the cinder slope, as the four-horse team, no longer guided by the leather ribbons in Pettigrew's capable fists, swing out of the ruts in panicked flight.

Within a few minutes Wheeler stops the stage, and Rogan joins him, to capture and tie up the two passengers.

"They're all set for a ride, Richaree," announces Wheeler, slamming the stage door on the trussed-up couple. "Let's go!"

Wheeler climbs aboard the stage, straddles Pettigrew's corpse, and picks up the driver's lines and whip. The four horses lunge into the collars. With Rogan throwing his weight on the spokes of a rear wheel, the Concord extricates itself from the loose sand and rolls off to the north.

A hundred yards off the road is a flat patch of innocent looking sand, its smooth

crust masking a deadly quicksand *Sumadero.* Wheeler lashes the team into a run, rumbling across the volcanic lava deposits straight for the lethal quagmire.

The team snorts in alarm as their hoofs plunge fetlock deep through the yielding crust. Momentum carries the big coach off the firm lava. Steel-shod wheels sink to the hubs by the time the Concord's team reaches the center of the treacherous *sumadero,* floundering hock-deep in gluey mire.

Richaree Rogan, galloping up with Wheeler's horse in tow, flings a rope to his partner. Wheeler catches the noose and adjusts the loop around his torso at armpit height. Then he steps from a wheel to the *sumadero* crust.

His spike-heeled cowboy boots break through under his weight, but Rogan's horse takes up the slack in the rope and skids Wheeler across the fractured yellow crust to the safety of the lava rocks.

A moment later the two are in the saddle. Without so much as a backward glance at the doomed stagecoach, the ambushers gallop off across the sweltering flats to vanish behind the Sprawling slopes of Massacre Peak.

Time passes and the two helpless prisoners in the slowly sinking stagecoach are getting closer and closer to death, and then the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk arrive—to sight the sinking Concord.

"The Adobeville coach, Hawk!" cries the Masked Rider, as they send their mounts threading through the cactus and boulders toward the grim scene.

The Masked Rider and the Yaqui go into swift action when they reach the stage and finally succeed in rescuing the man and the girl in the coach. From Ted and Carmelita the Masked Rider learns what has happened.

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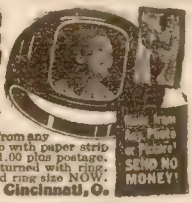

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shorter Western yarns in the next issue, all of them filled with the dauntless courage of the swift-riding waddies of the rangeland. A fiction feast for everyone!

OUR LETTER BOX

WE value your opinions, ideas and suggestions—so let's hear from more of our readers! Write and tell us about the stories you like best and about those that did not appeal to you in this and other issues of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Your letters and postcards help us greatly in planning future issues.

And now let's look over excerpts from just a few of the many letters we are constantly receiving:

I like MASKED RIDER WESTERN better than any other magazine. I think Blue Hawk should play a bigger part. The story I liked best was WAR IN MASSACRE BASIN, by Charles N. Heckelmann.—*Alfred Mitchell, Burnaby, Newestminister, B. C.*

Thanks for writing, Alfred. Glad you like the magazine so well.

I have just finished reading LONGHORN RAILS, and thought it sure was swell. Please if you will, print the past life of the Masked Rider. I have been reading this book for five years and I think every issue has been swell, so keep up the good work—*Junior Fry, Marion, Ill.*

Glad that you are such a steady reader of MASKED RIDER WESTERN, Junior. We'll consider your suggestion. Thanks for your letter.

I sure do like The Masked Rider Western. All the stories are excellent, but RAIDERS OF RIFLE ROCK was my favorite. The other stories I liked best were BULLET HARVEST FOR RENEGADES, BRAND OF THE UNKNOWN, and WAR IN MASSACRE BASIN. I would like to see Blue Hawk's gray horse named. Keep up the good work.—*Randall Perkins, Hardyville, Kentucky.*

I am a steady reader of MASKED RIDER WEST-

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ERN. I like it best of any Western book I've read. The Masked Rider is always good. But I didn't like "Omar The Harness Maker," by Allan K. Echols in the last issue.—*Sally Hodges, New Bern, N. C.*

Thanks for your letter, Sally. Sorry you didn't like OMAR THE HARNESS MAKER. Quite a few of our other readers didn't agree with you on that—but we want all of you to tell us just which stories you do and do not like.

I enjoy all your stories. I have heard different readers say there isn't enough romance in the magazine. I like LONGHORN RAILS and the two girls in it. I'd like to see the Masked Rider get married, and she could go with him and Blue Hawk on their travels.—*Marlow Anderson, Houston, Minn.*

Seems from the letters we have been getting that quite a number of our readers are worrying about the lack of romance in Wayne Morgan's life, Marlow. And some are all for romance in our novels while others object. What do the rest of you readers think? Thanks for your letter, Marlow.

That's all for this time—but there will be more quotes from your letters next issue. See you all then—and thanks to everybody. And, remember—please address all your letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. So long for now!

—THE EDITOR.

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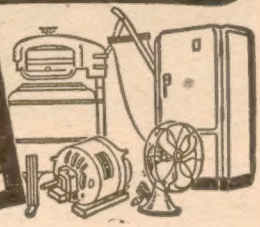

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